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Tales and stories of dugongs from Solomon Islands

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Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to all who kindly shared their *kastom* stories so that we could read about them: the Bailangi and Buni tribes of Lau Lagoon; the communities of Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province; the Kidipale tribe, Naro, Guadalcanal Province; and the communities of Utupua, Temotu Province.

Also with dedication: to all the students, artists and creative writers who took part in the 2018 National Dugong and Seagrass Art and Creative Writing Competition.

To all the children of Solomon Islands: May you be inspired by these stories, and may they enrich your understanding of our culture and the relationship we have with dugongs and their seagrass habitats.

With love

The National Facilitating Committee

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Facts about seagrass and dugongs

Seagrass

Seagrass is a marine flowering plant that can grow underwater and has true root structures that hold the plant in place in sandy or muddy bottoms. Like plants on land, seagrass has upright leaves that use sunlight for photosynthesis, and it also produces seeds and flowers. Seagrass can be found in shallow coastal areas that become exposed during low tides, and it can also be found in deep waters.

Seagrass beds are important for protecting coastlines and cleaning coastal waters. They provide food and shelter, and they serve as a nursery ground for fish and other marine animals. They are home to sea cucumbers (beche-de-mer), sea stars, sea horses and sea shells—and animals such as dugongs and sea turtles, along with fish species such as rabbit fish and thumbprint emperors, depend mainly on seagrass for food.



Seagrass in Solomon Islands

In Solomon Islands, seagrass is found in almost every province. Large seagrass beds can be found in Western, Choiseul and Malaita provinces, and Lau lagoon contains the largest area of seagrass in the country. Ten species of seagrass are found in Solomon Islands: *Cymodocea rotundata*, *Cymodocea serrulata*, *Halodule uninervis*, *Syringodium isoetifolium*, *Thalassodendron ciliatum*, *Enhalus acoroides*, *Halophila decipiens*, *Halophila minor*, *Halophila ovalis* and *Thalassia hemprichii*.

Seagrass beds are one of the most valuable habitats for Solomon Islanders. Fishers use them as fishing grounds, while farmers use them for mulching their gardens to enrich the soil and help improve their yield.



Dugongs

Dugongs are large mammals that live in shallow, sheltered areas near the coast. They are also known as sea cows because they eat seagrass—as much as 40 kg in a day. Dugongs grow up to 3 m in length, weigh up to 500 kg and can live more than 50 years. Females give birth in the water and usually to only one calf. Like other mammals, the mother nurses her calf with milk, and the calf stays close to its mother for several years.

Dugongs in Solomon Islands

Dugongs are important for keeping coastal habitats healthy, and they are a valuable source of food. In Solomon Islands, dugongs have high cultural value in many communities. Since they reproduce slowly, hunting has a big impact. In 2018, it became illegal to hunt and kill dugongs under the Fisheries Management (Prohibited Activities) Regulations 2018.

Do you know the local name for dugongs in your language?

Province	Region/Area	Seagrass	Dugong
Malaita	Lau	Afu'u	Iatekwa
	West/East Areáre	Araka	Haihu'u
	South Malaita		Taehu
	LangaLanga	Alaga	Faifu
Isabel	Maringe	Buburu thonga	Vena
	Kia	Rumu	Rumu
Western	Roviana	Kulikuli	Rumu
	Marovo, Kolombangara	Checheu Pa Idere	Rumu
	Shortlands		Tou
	Ranongga		Rungu
Makira	Ulawa		Haehu
Central	Russell Islands	Bamu	Kelekel
Choiseul	Gilbertese	Kokolie	Te tire (pronounced Te sire)
Temotu	Vanikoro	Kingnekobe	Anive
	Utupua	Namaga	Lolwa
	Duff Islands	Kalokalo	Kimokimo
	Reef Islands	Nga	Tekumo

Table 1. Local names for dugongs and seagrass in Solomon Islands.



Dugong tales in Solomon Islands

The dugong legend of Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province

Storyteller: Chief Ben Simon

Long ago, there lived a man with his parents in the village of Gwaihareko in the area around Lau Lagoon. He married a pretty woman from the village of Bailangi, and they had a son. The young wife was a strong, hardworking woman, and she got the attention of the whole village, which made her mother-in-law very jealous.

One day, her mother-in-law decided to test the strength of her new daughter-in-law. She put a heavy red stone, known as *mae nagi*, in a bag for her daughter-in-law to carry home. When the daughter-in-law lifted the bag, she found it very heavy but could not check what was inside because that would be disrespectful to her mother-in-law. As she struggled to walk quickly with the bag, her jealous mother-in-law watched on.

When they returned to the village, she threw the bag down and emptied it. She was shocked to see the *mae nagi* hidden among the harvest and the firewood. When she realized her mother-in-law had tricked her, she got angry. She felt the trust and bond she had created with her new family has been destroyed. She cried, folded her traditional pandanus umbrella, called *kaufe*, under her armpit and walked down to the seaside. Her husband begged her to stay and forgive his mother. He even offered her a pig, shell money and dolphin teeth as compensation, but she refused.

The woman walked down to the seaside and sat on a stone called *four Sualana*. She felt sorry for herself and said to her husband, "After all the good things I've done, this is how your mother has treated me. I will leave you so that she can find a better woman to marry you and make her happy."

The woman cried and started to draw different marine animals on the large stone. She drew a turtle, dolphin, spadefish, parrotfish, rabbitfish and needlefish but did not like any of them. Finally, she drew a female dugong. She liked it because of its size and strength as well as its resemblance to a woman because of its breasts. She also knew dugongs lived close to the shore so that meant her husband could see her.

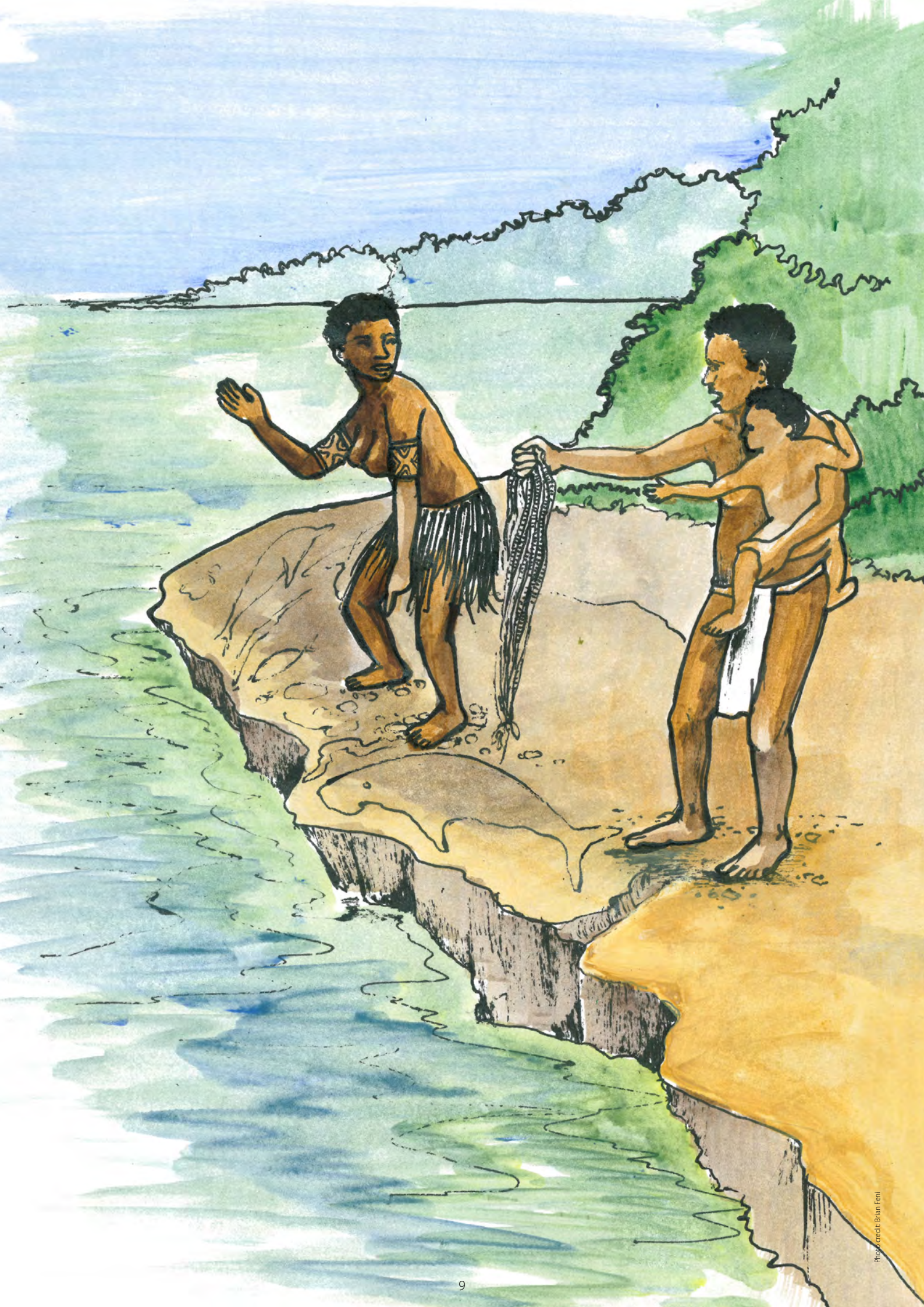
She had almost finished the drawing when her husband appeared with their son. He asked her to come home and breastfeed the baby, but she refused. She told him to go home and look after the child. Pointing to her dugong drawing on the stone she said, "Today I will go away from you into the sea and change into this animal," and then jumped into the sea.

When she reappeared on the surface, she had turned into a dugong, known as *ia tekwa* in Lau. Her husband and son shed tears and walked home broken-hearted.

Since then, the two tribes of Bailangi and Buni in Lau Lagoon have never eaten dugong meat.

Dugong channel (link to [uru-uru](#))

In the past, there were many dugongs in Lau lagoon, where they grazed on the shallow seagrass beds near the shore. With their constant swimming and grazing, the dugongs created a deep channel through the seagrass, and people used this dugong channel, or *uru-uru*, to paddle to the mangroves. But when people started killing these animals for their meat, the number of dugongs dropped, and the channel filled up with mud. Nowadays, people find it difficult to reach the mangroves during low tide.



Dugong legend from Utupua, Temotu Province

Storyteller: Casper Gonge

Once upon a time, there lived the Abomo tribe in a village called Autanye on Utupua Island in the province of Temotu. The village was crowded with women and girls, so the chief ordered some of them to leave in different directions. Among them was a girl who was ordered to start a new inland village. There she met and married a man and, after some time, had a baby boy. The boy was five years old when the mother gave birth to a baby girl. One day, there was no water in their village, so the boy went with his mother to the seaside to wash his baby sister's clothes. The boy played and swam in a pond on the reef, pretending to dive for shells while waiting for his mother. That became part of his daily routine. He always enjoyed playing in the sea.

One rainy afternoon, mother and son went down again to the washing site, and the little boy eagerly went into the sea to play. When evening came and it was time to leave, the boy could not get out of the pool. He heard his mother call for him, but he could not answer. His legs were stuck. It felt like they had been tied together, and he could not stretch them. The boy heard his mother calling again and he answered, "My legs are heavy. I cannot come ashore." His mother called again to get him to come home and was shocked to find her son with his legs stuck together in the pool. The boy explained what happened and asked his mother to go back home and bring him some food. She returned with some *kakake* (a giant taro), and he asked her to throw it to him. He caught it and placed it on his nose to stop him from hurting people. The boy knew he was changing into something else and decided it was better to remove his teeth to avoid biting people. The *kakake* on his nose was meant to stop him from hurting anyone. That is why dugongs are herbivores.

The boy begged his mother to return home to his sister. Saddened, the mother returned home but tried to wake up during the night to listen to her son. Near midnight, she could hear him splashing his legs, which had now turned into fin-like flippers. His voice echoed through the night as he moved around in the sea, thrashing the side of the island as he tried to free himself.

As daylight came, his mother ran down to the sea and was surprised to see that her son's movements had broken the island into four. These became the four harbors of Utupua: Navotiraba, Avanubo, Awete and Arolir. His mother yelled to him to stop breaking the island or else he would separate it into smaller islands. She ordered him to go back to Autanye, her native village, where there was plenty of seagrass. There the boy found other dugongs and lived content among the seagrass beds. The village is now named Lolwapo, which means "the place of Lolwa (dugongs)."

Some people in Utupua believe that dugongs can change themselves to human beings and go ashore into the mangroves. The people say they see them wondering the mangroves and, when frightened, running down to the sea to change back into dugongs.



Dugong story of Naro, Guadalcanal

Storyteller: Chief, Kidipale tribe

On the northwest coast of Guadalcanal, in a village called Vangulu, there once lived a family with two daughters. The elder daughter's name was Salo. One day, the mother told Salo to look after her younger sister while their father and mother went to the garden. Not long after the parents left, the younger daughter started to cry. Salo bathed her and tried to make her sleep, but her baby sister would not stop crying. Salo tried everything to make her stop, but nothing worked.

Salo decided to walk to the middle of the village, where she took a young coconut from a tree there. It was a sacred coconut and tasted very sweet. Salo husked the coconut fruit, broke it and tried to give her sister the water, but she refused to drink it. Instead, her baby sister wanted to eat the meat of the coconut. Salo broke the coconut and tried feeding her baby sister, but again she refused to eat. Salo became frustrated with her baby sister and did not know what else to do.

In the evening, her parents came back from the garden. Salo said, "Mother, I am so tired. I do not know how to calm my little sister. She cries a lot." The mother was not happy with Salo and said some angry words. Salo was hurt and decided to leave the family. She bit the half of the coconut that she had tried to feed her baby sister with and left the village.

Realizing what her elder daughter was doing, the mother tried to calm Salo down and begged her to stay. But Salo would not listen to her mother and continued to walk down toward the sea. The mother put decorations on Salo to say sorry, but she still would not stay. Salo continued to walk with all her decorations toward the sea. Reaching the Bahi passage at the seashore, Salo removed all her decorations and returned them to her mother to give to her little sister. Again, the mother tried to convince her to stay, but she would not listen. Salo walked out to a stone in the middle of the Bahi passage and climbed onto it. She turned to her mother and said, "Goodbye mother and sister. I will now go."

Salo then jumped into the sea. Her feet changed into a fin-like tail and she turned into a dugong. The mother could see the tail splashing in the sea. She waited until sunset until she realized Salo was not coming back anymore.

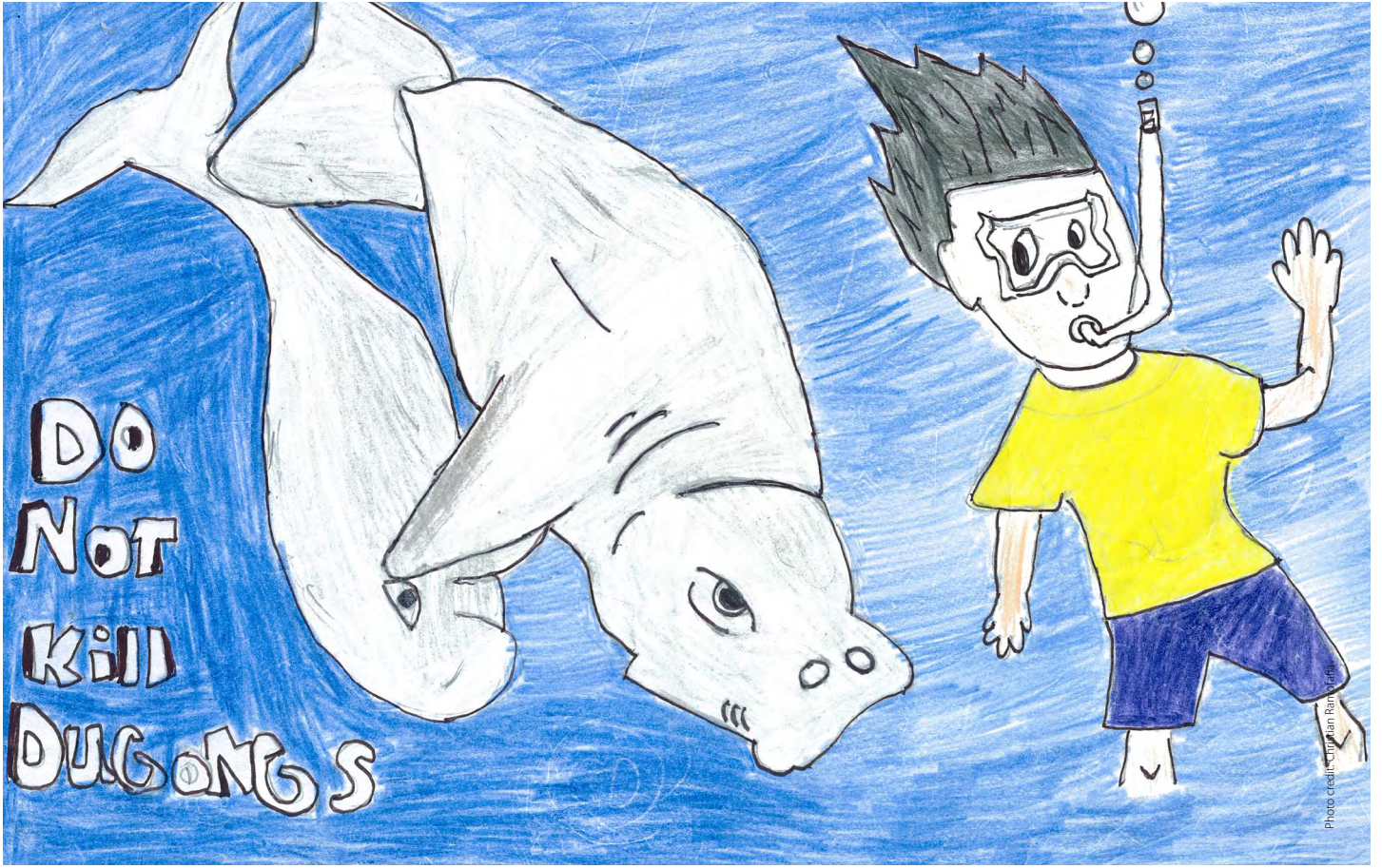
Since that day, it has been tabu for the men and women of the tribes from Naro to encounter dugongs in the sea. They believe that if they touch a dugong, it will die instantly, so they respect the mammal.



National arts and writing competition entries

Saving Bete

By Ishmael Nori (Open Category, 1st Prize Winner)



Once upon a time in a sea world . . .

"G'd afternoon my best friend, Bete!" Honu, a young turtle, greeted Bete, a young dugong, with a smile as he appeared behind the seagrass.

"G'd afternoon, Honu," Bete replied weakly.

"Bete, I am so sorry to hear the passing of your mother last week. I wanted to come visit you, but I was away on the other island finding food. It is becoming scarce these days."

"It's all right, Honu," Bete said. "I managed to get through it."

"Bete, what is going on here, and where is everybody? The seagrass is dying. And where are our neighbors: the fish, crabs and shrimp?"

"They all moved away, Honu. This place is no longer safe for us anymore."

Bete stood on his tail to look across the seagrass meadow and continued. "Since the old human moved in and established himself on the coast, life has become difficult and dangerous. Last week, Mum died from a head injury after she was run over by the old man in his aluminum boat. She was surfacing to breathe when the accident happened."

Bete paused. "Now the seaweeds are dying from the fertilizer chemicals from his farm, and the seagrass meadow is depleting from the damage caused by his outboard motor propeller."

"I am so sorry, Bete," Honu said. "I can also see you have also lost so much weight. You should consider moving too. This place does not look good."

"Yeah, I really wanted to move too, but I don't have the strength to swim far anymore. I'd rather die of hunger here than die of exhaustion somewhere foreign."

As Bete and Honu were talking, the sound of an engine suddenly came close.

"Lower your head!" Bete shouted.

Both mammals ducked their heads as old Bill's engine went past overhead. The propeller missed their heads but caught the seagrass blades and got tangled. They watched as the old man stopped the engine, levered it up and cursed as he was untangling the seagrass from his propeller. It was an all too familiar scene for Bete.

"Wow that was close, Bete!" Honu exclaimed.

"Yeah I know."

Meanwhile, in the human world . . .

"Oh no, not again! I hate seagrass," old Bill ranted to himself as he untangled seagrass blades from his engine propeller.

Old Bill, as he was known and called by his neighbors and friends, had just moved in a few months earlier to live along the coast. He'd never married, and lived alone. He owned a one-hectare Chinese cabbage farm, which stretched from behind his house right up inland along a stream that ran past his cottage, out into the ocean, and often gets flooded when it rains.

Next to old Bill's house was the home of the local town's fishery officer, Martin. Martin, his wife and their seven-year-old son had been living on the coast for almost two years now. Their son's name was Sam.

Sam had been mute since birth and spent most of his days at home. During the day, he'd either pick up seashells or just rest on a hammock on their balcony, looking out at the ocean. Sam was lying in the hammock observing and admiring the beauty of the ocean as it was slowly transitioning into red and yellow colors that were reflecting from the late afternoon sky. Across the seagrass meadow, he watched as old Bill was trying to clear the seagrass from his engine propeller.

"Old Bill never learns," Sam murmured to himself. "He should have avoided running over the seagrass by slowing down or choosing the other route. Silly old Bill."

Then Sam noticed something popping up from the water between him and where old Bill's boat was floating. It was the young dugong he had spotted with her mother many times, and a turtle. They were slowly swimming toward him.

Meanwhile in the sea world . . .

"There he is, Bete," Honu said, as they surfaced on the water. "Let's swim over to him."

"He is looking at us. What shall we do, Honu?" Bete asked.

"Let's swim over to him and invite him to swim with us. Then we can slowly lead him to your place so that he can see the damage."

"Great idea, Honu. You are always full of great ideas," Bete said, complimenting her friend.

"Just trust your instincts, Bete," Honu said as they slowly swam over to Sam. "I am sure this boy is kind and will not harm us."

"How close should we swim to him, Honu?" Bete said. "I am a little bit shy."

"Shy of what?" Honu asked, staring at Bete.

"Shy of being me. Look, I don't look like any one thing. I look like a dolphin, but I am not a dolphin. I look like a sea lion, but I am not a sea lion. I look..."

"Stop it, Bete," Honu interrupted. "Don't be silly. You are what you are. You are a dugong. A rare fish, okay?"

"Okay."

"Let's stop here," Honu ordered. "I think we are close enough."

"Aw, he is waving at us," Bete said. "I am starting to like him already, Honu."

Human world...

Sam noticed the dugong and turtle were swimming in his direction. He waved them over and started walking toward the water's edge, as if he were waiting for them.

The two sea animals swam closer, and Sam kept smiling and waving to them. He wanted to let them know that he was a friend.

Bete and Honu stopped. Sam slowly waded into the water toward them. He was careful not to scare them off. Any false move by Sam and the two creatures would vanish back into the water.

Sam waded into the water until it reached his waist. But suddenly the dugong and turtle drew back. Sam kept wading toward them. As he almost reached them, they drew farther back. Bete and Honu were trying to lead Sam to the seagrass where Bete lived.

Sam was going to wade even farther when his mum called out for him from the balcony of the house. He waved farewell to his two new friends and waded back home.

Meanwhile back in the sea world...

"Hey, Bete. See, the plan was working," Honu said excitedly. "If his mom hadn't called him back, the boy would have followed us here."

"Sam."

"What?" Honu asked.

"Sam is his name," Bete said. "I heard his mum call his name."

"Oh, okay. Now we know his name. Not that we are going to call him by his name," Honu laughed. "Hey, Bete. It is getting darker. I think I'll spend tonight with you so that we can swim over to the boy, I mean Sam, again tomorrow morning. We really need to get him to come see this place and help."

"Aw, that'll be so nice of you, Honu. You are my only friend," Bete said and then kissed Honu on his forehead.

Meanwhile in Sam's world...

The sun had set, and night fell. Sam was already in bed, sleeping. In the middle of the night, he had a dream. He saw the young dugong crying in the middle of the dead seagrass meadow, and the turtle was trying to comfort her. He dreamt that the dugong was asking him for his help. He also saw his neighbor, old Bill, pouring fertilizers into the seagrass and destroying it by dragging his boat anchor to weed out the seagrass.

The next morning, as soon as he woke up, Sam got out of his bed and ran to the beach to check if his two new friends were where he'd met them yesterday. They were already there, at the exact same spot.

Sam waved to them and waded into the water toward them. The tide from last night remained low, but it would soon begin to rise.

As Sam nearly reached the dugong and the turtle, they moved backward. He continued following them into the water farther into the sea. Without realizing, he had waded all the way to the seagrass meadow, where the dugong lived. The two seagrass animals then dove into the seagrass, inviting Sam to their home.

Sam was in shock to see the state of the seagrass. It had changed from greenish to brownish, and it was depleting too.

When he and his parents moved in two years ago, Sam's dad used to take him in a canoe over the meadow. And that time, as Sam recalled, the seagrass was beautiful and plentiful. But this was not the case anymore.

"Now I know why the dugong and the turtle brought me over here," Sam thought. "They wanted me to see this damage. I have to get Dad to do something about this."

Sam took a last look in search of his two friends, who were right under his feet in the water. He reached out and touched their heads and thought, "I will help save your place."

Sam urgently waded back to the beach and ran into the house to find his dad, Martin. He found him in the lounge having a cup of coffee. Frantically, in sign language, he told his dad what he had seen. He told him about the state of the seagrass and about his encounter with his two new sea friends.

Sam's dad leapt from the couch and followed him hurriedly outside to investigate. The tide was still low, and from his balcony Martin could see clear across the water and into the sea grass meadow. He too was in shock.

Just as he was observing the water, old Bill's boat appeared from the harbor point, returning from his usual early morning fishing trip. The boat was heading straight into the seagrass area. Before Martin could wave old Bill off the seagrass, the engine's propeller got tangled up with the seagrass and stopped suddenly.

"Oh my God," Martin said as he wiped his face with his right hand and held his waist with his left hand in anger. He was nodding his head sideways in disagreement. He was agitated.

"I got to talk to old Bill," Martin said and walked over to the edge of the beach, close enough to yell out to old Bill.

"Bill, I need to have a word with you!"

Martin walked over to old Bill's jetty and waited for him. Sam followed. Old Bill moored his boat on the jetty, threw the anchor on the wharf and got out from the dingy.

"Hi, Martin," old Bill greeted him as he was securing the dingy rope to the wharf. "I am sick of that seagrass. It is a real hazard. I keep running into it and getting my engine propeller entangled. I really need to clear it away," old Bill complained as he walked back down into the dingy to pick up his catch.

"No, you are not going to clear it, Bill," Martin interrupted. "This is why I am here to talk to you."

Martin moved closer to the edge of the wharf overlooking old Bill as he was getting off the dingy again with all his gear. With both hands on his waist, Martin continued. "The seagrass is home to dugongs and many other fish species. When I first moved here two years ago, we used to spot two dugongs in the seagrass meadows. But my son has told me this morning he can no longer spot the adult dugong. He said he saw you run over it weeks ago."

Martin began to accuse old Bill in a serious tone. “The seagrass is dying too, because of the fertilizers from your farm and your continuous running into them with your outboard motor.”

Old Bill did not say a word. He was a bit shocked. He was not expecting his neighbor to talk to him that way, especially in that tone. He kept looking back at the seagrass as Martin was talking.

“I am so sorry, Martin,” old Bill said, realizing the seriousness in Martin’s voice. “I indeed ran over a dugong two weeks ago. I did not see it surfacing. I did not know if it was seriously hurt. But I am very sorry. It was an accident.”

“Yes, I am sure it was an accident, Bill.”

“Martin, I don’t know much about dugongs and seagrass, but now they interest me,” old Bill said remorsefully. “And I feel so guilty for destroying them and their food,” he paused, wiping his eyes. “Please, Martin. Tell me more about dugongs and seagrass and what I can do to help protect them both.”

“Dugongs are sometimes called sea cows, Bill. That’s because they only eat grass—seagrass. If they run out of seagrass, they will likely die of starvation.”

Martin began to lecture old Bill. “A female dugong can only give birth to one calf every two to seven years. This means their population is small and grows slowly.”

Bill did not say a word. He was so remorseful and kept looking back at the seagrass.

“There are many things you can do to help, Bill,” Martin continued, this time in a much lower tone. “First of all, you have to reduce the amount of fertilizers you use on your farm. Fertilizers kill the seagrass when the rain washes down into the ocean. Secondly, you have to slow down or lever up your boat engine when motoring over the seagrass areas. And thirdly, you need to start thinking about planting new seagrass.”

“Martin, Sam,” old Bill looked to Sam, who was standing behind his dad, “I will stop using fertilizer in my farm as of today, and I will put up buoys to prevent boats from running over the seagrass, with warning signs telling mariners to avoid running over dugongs. I will also get my farm workers to start replanting the seagrass.”

Old Bill reached out his right hand to shake Martin and Sam’s hands. “I am so thankful for you two,” he said. And still holding Sam’s hand, “I will make it my personal responsibility to protect our seafront.”

Back in the sea meadow. . .

“Honu, I was just watching Sam and his dad talking to the old man at the old man’s jetty,” Bete said. “I could sense they were talking to the old man about us and the seagrass. I could also tell the old man was genuinely sorry for his careless actions.”

“Aw, I am so glad to hear that, Bete,” Honu said. “I told you, not all humans are bad and unkind. There are many kind and thoughtful humans out there—humans who love to swim with us and humans who always want to protect us.”

“Yeah I know, Honu. They just need to know about us. Unlike humans, who can grow and produce their own food, we rely only on what is available to us. If it is gone, we will be gone too.”

“Hey, Bete. Can we swim up to the surface to check on our new friend, Sam, if he is out there?”

“Sure,” Bete said, smiling.

Sam and Martin . . .

Sam and his dad were returning from old Bill's place when Bete and Honu surfaced on the water.

In sign language, Sam said, "Dad! Look!" pointing toward the two heads popping out of the water just in front of them. "My two friends: the dugong and the turtle."

Martin and Sam then waved to Bete and Honu. Sam and his dad noticed the dugong and the turtle were swimming over to them. They stood at the edge of the water and watched. Bete and Honu swam right up to them until they touched the beach with their chests. Sam and his dad squatted over the two sea creatures but avoided touching them. They didn't want to scare them. They only stared into their eyes. There on the beach were two humans staring at two sea creatures. And they were talking to each other, even though they came from two different worlds.

"From now on, old Bill will fix your home," Martin began to say to the dugong and the turtle. "So after a few months, you should have your home restored back to what it was before."

Martin was reassuring the two sea animals, even though he was not sure they understood a word.

In reply, although the two humans could not understand or hear what the dugong and turtle were saying, Bete said, "I am so thankful for you, Sam, and your dad for saving my home and my life. I cannot thank you enough, but from the bottom of my heart, thank you, thank you."

In an act of respect, Bete and Honu slowly closed their eyes, bowed their heads and opened them again. They then began to reverse back into the water. Sam and his dad waved goodbye as Bete and Honu disappeared under the water.

Bete and Honu one month later . . .

"Hey, Bete. Is this for real?" Honu asked as she approached from the tall seagrass, passed some fish and swam over some crabs to Bete, who was having fresh seagrass for breakfast. "Wow, you have put on a lot of weight too, Bete."

"Aw, hello my best friend!" Bete reached out to hug Honu. "Long time, no see," Bete said, looking into her turtle friend's eyes as she inspected him. Yeah I am glad you noticed the difference. Old Bill has really kept his word. And look!" Bete shouted, pointing to her neighbors. "My neighbors have now all returned too. And oh, Honu," Bete cheekily signaled to Honu with her eyes to look across the meadow, where a young male dugong was flirtingly eating seagrass.

"Aw, what's his name?" whispered Honu.

"Sssshhhh."

The mind of Bulele

By Anza Fa'alimae (Open Category)

Bulele was a smart and playful boy who went home late every day after school. His father was a faithful man and always waited patiently for his arrival before he went off to do his planned tasks for the day. The boy's mother was a very hardworking woman, who was always busy doing gardening. His brothers were at boarding schools, while his sisters were in town living with their uncle.

One afternoon, Bulele came home late as usual, but his father was not there. It seemed strange to Bulele that his father, who always waited for him to come home from school, was away.

Bulele, who was only five years old at the time, did not know where his father had gone, so he started asking himself questions: "What is happening? Where did my father go? Why did he go? When did he leave? When will he come back?"

The boy ran to check his father's toolbox to see if a tool was missing. If he could identify the tool that was missing, he would know where his father had gone. If it were a garden tool, then he would know his father must have gone to the garden, but there was no garden tool missing. He checked his father's carpentry tools, but no tools were missing there either. He investigated further and found out that his father was on what at first he called a "rescue run," but Bulele later realized it was a fisherman's "big catch."

It was a sunny afternoon on the beautiful coast of the lagoon. The reflection of the sun on the water was brilliant, and the breeze from the nearby mountains was so cool that if you were on the coast of the lagoon you could close your eyes and start dreaming about a tropical paradise.

There on the sea surface of the water, Bulele's father was struggling to reach a fisherman who had fought all day with a big catch. The battle was vicious and the fisherman was losing. He knew he could not continue this battle alone with the big catch, so he took out his shirt and waved it as high as he could, a sign of an SOS (emergency call).

Bulele's father saw the SOS. The fisherman was truly a friend in need and Bulele's father was a friend indeed, so he hurriedly pulled down his canoe and paddled as fast as he could to the fisherman.

Before the sun could touch the horizon, Bulele's father and the fisherman made sure they reached the shore. The beams of the afternoon sun had started to fade, and there on the shore Bulele stood, watching his shadow shaking in the tiny waves that kept rolling on the surface of the water. He waited eagerly to see what his father and the fisherman would bring back.

Minutes passed and the evening shadows added more beauty to the lagoon. Bulele had stopped watching his shadow by then and was now looking right where his father and the fisherman were. He could see them clearly as they slowly approached. As they drew closer, he recognized the fisherman.

"It's Sam, the turtle hunter," Bulele whispered to himself. "But there is something like a log floating between their canoes," he whispered again, narrowing his eyes to the suspicious log. As they paddled closer to the shore, Bulele saw that it was not a log. "Is it fish?" he asked himself. "Strange fish."

"Elephant! Elephant! Elephant!" Bulele shouted when his father and Sam reached the shore with the big catch.

Indeed, the sea animal looked strange—more like an elephant than a fish. But Bulele was not convinced it was an elephant. He ran around the sea animal and looked at it closely, trying to figure out what it really was. He had a closer look, again and again, but could not figure out what that strange fish was. In the back of his mind, he knew it was something different.

"What is the name of the elephant fish?" Bulele asked. "*Heiiuhu*," his father replied in their native language. Drawn to the animal's strange appearance, Bulele decided he wanted to keep it for a pet. But while he was still talking to his father, four muscular men, who were also standing on the shore, quickly dragged the *heiiuhu* to the shore and slaughtered it.

Communities Lo Solomon Islands
must waka tugeda for
Protection Dugongs &
Conservation Seagrass



wilson Tofu

Photo credit: Wilson Tofu

The *heiiuhu* let out a sorrowful cry, like a last plea for mercy, as the men's sharp knives cut open its body and blood spilled out. Tears rolled down Bulele's face when he saw this, and he turned to watch the sun as it slowly touched the horizon. "The life of another innocent fish has just been taken," he said and took a deep breath of sympathy.

"Men are like lions," Bulele thought to himself as they cut the body of the strange fish to pieces and shared it with all the villagers who stood watching. "Hungry men are angry men. Their heads are stubborn and their ears are deaf. How long do marine animals have to spare their lives to feed human beings? How long do they have to lose their flesh in frying pans, pots and ovens?"

It was an odd evening for the whole village. Visitors who could smell the delicious scent from the ovens came to the village and insisted they would not leave until they tasted the meat.

At Bulele's house, the aroma from the oven was very strong and tempting, even for Bulele. Although he only knew the name and nothing else about the species, he was always compassionate toward every marine species and he did not want to taste it. Bulele resisted the temptation that evening by going to sleep, as tiredness overwhelmed him.

When he woke up in the morning, however, Bulele was hungry. He saw the *heiiuhu* meat on the table.

"Who would not want to taste the delicious meat when it is served on the dining table?" Bulele said to himself. "Who would refuse it? No one, no one at all."

Bulele succumbed to temptation and ate the *heiiuhu* meat. He admitted it was delicious and that no one would be able to refuse it, even if they were full and were offered a second plate. But he knew he was wrong. He felt guilty and begged for forgiveness. He prayed and prayed for the soul of the *heiiuhu* to forgive him and forget what he had done. He even made a vow that he would not eat *heiiuhu* meat again. Instead, he would fight for the likes of *heiiuhu* and other marine animals and would ask people not to kill and eat them.

The next morning, Bulele woke up to the sounds of pouring rain while his family slept soundly. It poured down on the whole village, washing away the smell of the *heiiuhu*. This was exactly what Bulele wanted, because the smell had lingered in the air for the past three days and he wanted it gone.

The rain did not stop Bulele from getting up. He was still so curious about *heiiuhu* that could not wait any longer. He covered himself with an umbrella and walked through the pouring rain toward his grandfather's house, hoping he would know something about the strange fish. When he arrived, his grandfather Ngwae was surprised to see him because he did not expect a little kid to be walking in the pouring rain, especially in the morning. Bulele wasted no time and asked his grandfather about *heiiuhu*.

The conversation between Bulele and his grandfather was very heated in the cold rain, and Ngwae answered his grandson by telling him a legend about a woman who turned into a *heiiuhu*.

"Once there was a man who searched his whole village for a woman to marry, but he could not find one. All the potential brides his parents arranged for him were unsuccessful. But one day, his parents found a woman he liked and negotiated with her to marry their son. She agreed and eventually married him.

"The man's wife was a very hardworking woman and never spent a day doing nothing. She would help her mother-in-law with her garden chores, cut branches off fallen trees for firewood and carry them home with food on her back after working in the garden.

"Her hard work and willingness made her popular in the community, and she was recognized as the most hardworking person in the village. This made her mother-in-law angry. She was so jealous of the recognition her daughter-in-law received from their village, as well as the surrounding villages, that one day she decided to trick her daughter-in-law. She loaded two heavy red stones, known as *naki*, into her daughter-in-law's basket before filling it with taros, yams and kumara. When they finished working in the garden, she told her daughter-in-law to

carry the basket home. The girl tried to lift it, but it was too heavy. At first she stumbled, but when she tried again, she managed to carry it a little ways before stopping to rest.

“The load was heavier than the ones she was used to carrying, but she did not want to open the basket to see what was in it out of respect for her mother-in-law, who was constantly looking back at her with her watchful eyes. The daughter-in-law rested many times along the way before arriving home, while her mother-in-law continued walking, looking so innocent yet feeling full of guilt.

“When they reached home, the helpless daughter-in-law could not lower the heavy basket. Instead, it slipped and she dropped the basket. As the heavy stones rolled out, she realized her mother-in-law had fooled her, and she was upset.

“Although she had a little son to raise, the daughter-in-law was so hurt and full of pain that she refused to be part of the family anymore. While making her way to the coast, she broke down in tears. There she thought of how she would leave her family, whom she had worked so hard to feed for such a long time. After thinking long and hard, she finally decided she wanted to turn into a fish, so she started drawing what kind of fish she wanted to be. After attempting several drawings, she decided she deserved to be a *heiiuhu*.

“The *heiiuhu* was regarded as a big fish that had the strength to destroy fishing nets. The girl decided she wanted to become a *heiiuhu* for three reasons: It swam close to the shore, which would make it easier for her husband and son to see her, the female had breasts just like those of a woman, and also because it was a vegetarian fish. After making up her mind, she jumped into the sea.

“It was a sad moment for husband and son as they watched their hardworking wife and mother jump into the sea, and they broke down in tears when she reappeared again on the surface in the form of a *heiiuhu*.

“From that day onward, the daughter-in-law’s tribe treated the sea animal as a taboo and were not allowed to kill or eat it,” Bulele’s grandfather said as he concluded the story.

Bulele’s mind was open. He now knew how important the *heiiuhu* was to some tribes and societies.

Two years later, Bulele enrolled in a primary school, hoping he would learn something about *heiiuhu*. But by the time he finished Grade 6, he had learned nothing about what he longed for. Still, this did not stop his dream of knowing more about the strange fish.

Twenty years passed and Bulele was now a man. But he still longed to know more about *heiiuhu*. He kept searching until one day he heard the word “dugong.” He had never heard the word in primary school, but he found out it was the English word for *heiiuhu*. He recalled the day his father and Sam, the turtle hunter, brought that strange fish to the shore, and he remembered his father saying that it was called *heiiuhu*. “It was a dugong that my father and Sam brought that evening,” Bulele said to himself excitedly.

Sometime later, after searching hard for information, Bulele knew exactly what a dugong was. To many, the dugong is just a fish. To some, it is a delicious meat. To others, it is taboo. But to Bulele, the dugong was a big vegetarian or herbivorous sea animal that only feeds on seagrass and is often found in the warm coastal waters of Africa and Australia, and from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. He also knew it could be found in the Coral Triangle zone, an area in the Western Pacific that includes countries like Indonesia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and Solomon Islands, which have many diverse marine species.

He even knew that, although many dugongs were sighted along the coast of Solomon Islands in the past, their sightings are rare today. They are found in some provinces, like Malaita and Isabel, but only in small numbers of two. Bulele also understood the significant impact of dugongs on some societies in Solomon Islands. He knew that in Malaita dugongs are treated as taboo because of their traditional beliefs and that killing one may result in severe accidents for someone in the tribe.

But then a piece of information puzzled him: dugongs have a close relationship with seagrass.

“What is seagrass?” Bulele asked. While he was speaking to himself, an old man came by and heard him whispering. He could not hear what Bulele was saying, so he stopped and listened again. As Bulele repeated the same question over and over again, the old man heard him clearly. He knew Bulele what was struggling to understand, so he turned to where Bulele was standing.

“Seagrass is an important plant in the marine ecosystem,” the old man said. “It is like a loop in the marine food chain. If it is broken, the whole loop will be gone. Without seagrass, dugongs would no longer survive because they depend entirely on seagrass for their day-to-day diet. Search if you want to know more. The Bible says, ‘Seek and you will find. Knock and the door shall be open. Ask and it shall be given to you.’”

As always, Bulele went to search for bits and pieces of information. He could hear his own people laughing loudly at what he was doing. Yet even though he appeared to look like a fool, he continued researching until the end. He believed that what he was doing was right for him and everyone.

One sunny morning, Bulele got into his little dugout canoe and paddled around the lagoon looking for seagrass in and around the mangroves and reefs and soon found some along the coast.

He discovered that seagrass was not only food for dugongs but to other species in the marine ecosystem as well. It provided shelter for fish to hide from predators and was also used as a reproductive and nursery ground for fish and shellfish. Another interesting fact Bulele discovered was that seagrass kept the sea clean. Whenever there is a current, the water releases sediment from the sea bed, which makes the sea dirty. Seagrass slows the speed of the flowing current, making it possible for the sediment particles to settle, thus making the water clear again. There were also other uses of seagrass that Bulele found while searching for answers.

On one occasion, Bulele bought a watermelon at the local market. He went home and cut it open to have for dinner. The melon was so sweet, sweeter than anything he had tasted before that he started to ask himself questions again—just like he would ask himself whenever he encountered anything strange. His curiosity was so strong that he wanted to know who the farmer was, where he lived and how he grew his melons. Bulele later found out that the farmer had used seagrass as a fertilizer. This surprised Bulele because he could not believe seagrass could also be used as a fertilizer.

On another occasion, Bulele went to the coast to observe whatever marine species he could find. He was surprised when he saw people collecting seagrass in the reefs and wanted to know the reasons behind what they were doing.

“What will you use the seagrass for?” he asked.

“For medication,” a woman replied.

Bulele shook his head up and down in disbelief at the fact that seagrass could also be used as medicine. He was so amazed that he prayed as the tide drifted in and the western wind blew.

“Dear God, you created the sea not only for fish to live in but for the sick to heal,” he said. With this prayer, he went home.

That evening, Bulele was so tired from sitting on the coast the whole afternoon that he went to bed earlier than usual. After some hours of sleep, he had a dream.

He dreamt he was sitting on a stone along the seaside and heard all the marine species crying. Suddenly, a mermaid appeared before him. He was so afraid when he saw this that he jumped up from the stone and took a few steps back.

“Do not be afraid,” the mermaid called out to Bulele with a soft and tender voice. “Listen to me, please. We are under threat. Our lives are endangered by climate change caused by humans. Humans take lives from our homes every day. They ruin our homes with their destructive fishing methods. They hunt us every day. They kill us for food and for commercial purposes. This is why we keep on crying, and we will never stop until you humans change your careless attitudes.

“The seagrass that you saw people collecting yesterday is under threat from human-related influences too,” she continued. “The biggest threat today is logging. Cutting trees from the land allows rain to wash sediment and fuel from the logging machines into the sea. The seagrass dies when sediment from the land covers its habitat. Other marine species also die when chemicals from the fuel of the logging machines spilled on the land are washed by the rain into the sea. The seagrass, which many animals depend on for food and for other purposes, seems to be running out of stock. This is the reason why dugongs have left your shores. Today, you will hardly see any of them swimming along your shorelines. I have a lot to say, but I have to escape the cruel attitude of your people. They may be here any moment and catch me like they usually do to dugongs.

“How long do we have to suffer? How long do we have to bear the pain of losing our homes and loved ones? It seems no longer. Not too long. Sooner or later we will be gone forever and ever, and humans will suffer the most behind us. Tell them to change their careless attitudes toward us and make this earth a better place for all animals to survive. Dugongs will come back to your shores only if people change.”

The mermaid stopped talking and gave Bulele a pearl.

“Take this pearl,” she said. “It is a gift of fortune.”

These were her last words before she jumped and swam away into the deep.

Bulele woke up suddenly and checked the time. It was 3 a.m. but he could not fall back asleep. From his bed, he could hear the herald’s dawn loud and clear. Thoughts about the dream, the pearl and of how he could pass the mermaid’s message on to others kept him awake. He thought about the people among the older generation and how difficult it would be to change their minds and how young ones are easy to convince. These thoughts kept running through his mind till daybreak.

“I have to do something—not only for the dugongs and the seagrass but for all marine species,” Bulele thought to himself.

After a long, hard time thinking, Bulele decided he wanted people to change their careless attitudes. The first step would be getting everyone to know the local name of the marine species. He believed that knowing marine species, even just by their local names, would be a small step toward conservation.

Later, Bulele took out his pen from an old school bag and composed a song in pidgin. He called the song *Laef Blo Marin* meaning “marine life.” He later dedicated the song to everyone, especially the younger generation.

Laef Blo Marin

(Verse)

*Savve lo marin spicis
Luk aftarem oloketa gud fala
No ova fising, no ova havesting
Umi mas kipim gud laef blo marin.*

(Chorus)

*Umi mas kipim laef blo marin
Man, mere, pikini
Umi mas tingim future
Umi mas kipim laef blo marin
Umi mas kipim gud laef blo marin.*

The mystery of dugongs and seagrass

By Blaise Anderson (Open Category)

Dugongs have lives to lead and so does seagrass. Once they lived in freedom and peace in a friendly community in the sea, filled with joy, fellowship and communion with humans, who were their best friends, like brothers and sisters. Seagrass provided shelter and food for its other friends, including dugongs, who enjoyed being around seagrass. They were indeed grateful for each other, as they are to this day. The dwelling was like heaven on earth.

This went on for ages until humans were led astray by their own curiosity. Their lack of intelligence tempted them to desire more for themselves. Over many moons, the human heart gradually hardened. Wealth and the glitter of gold and silver were all they could see and dream of. Eventually, they rose to power and willfully forgot every good thing that had ever happened to them. In their pride, nothing could stop themselves in their quest. Yet neither of their newfound powers could restore the friendship and trust of their old friends nor could they rediscover the path to thank the old lady called Nature, who had been busy nurturing humans in the early days.

With their newly developed human-centered culture, it seem like there was no turning back. Their hearts were now as strong as iron. Every new dawn, they became more stubborn. They craved and acquired more possessions at the expense of the blood and pleasure of their sea friends. Dugongs, seagrass and the others watched painfully, in tears and with heavy hearts, and were powerless in their misery.

Dugongs and seagrass were profoundly affected by human ignorance, but they could not do anything or speak their mind freely for humans had long forgotten their old friends' tongue. Instead, humans developed a tongue of their own full of "I," "mine" and "ours." They could not even utter the word "theirs." The spitefulness of humans' newfound behavior was always the focus of discussion for dugongs, seagrass and others.

Dugongs and seagrass could only think and ask, "What has gone wrong with our old friends? Do we not co-exist for their benefit? Were they not mandated to oversee us? Is it not enough that they have everything to themselves already? What is the point of having more and losing your purpose? We mean no harm to them, but why do they harm us to the core?"

With all these uncountable questions, the only conclusion was that humans' desire for wealth had undeniably robbed them of their hearts. But the dugongs and seagrass did not give up. They said to themselves, "No matter how long the wait takes, we will still wait for humans to at least understand our existence with them."

The wait for their old friends lingers on for many tides, moons and ages, for it is believed that humans alone have the power to break the curse that made them anthropocentric. It is humans who can reconcile themselves to the blueprint for the universe. Many have come and gone and many have fallen into the unpleasant hands of humans. Nonetheless, the wait still continues.

As for dugongs and seagrass, their significance is still vital to this day, and they are still waiting for humans to at least recognize them in their misery. To this very day, the misery of dugongs and seagrass continues along with many other victimized plants and animals in the sea and on land. The chance for their survival in the ages to come rests solely on the conviction of humans toward them.



Photo credit: Shutterstock

My life as a dugong

By Anza Fa'alimae (Open Category)

Dugong, I am also known as a sea cow. I am beautiful but shy. Brownish-gray is the color of my skin. I am large and solid with short paddle-like front flippers and a tail to use as a propeller, a little like my cousins, the manatees, though they live in freshwater areas.

Shallow waters around sheltered areas of inshore islands are home to me and my dugong family. We dive, we forage, we chirp, we whistle, we bark our ways of communicating to each other. We have a great time on the seafloor.

When we gather together, sometimes in the lekking areas during the mating season, it is a sight to see. The male dugongs slash their tails, fight each other, roll and lunge their bodies, sometimes violently. All of this is done to attract females. When a competent male mounts a female, the game is over.

Once I am in a seagrass bed, I graze madly using my bristled sensitive snout, selecting the soft juicy juvenile shoots, rooting the grass when I am in a hurry. When there is less seagrass for me to eat, invertebrates such as worms and sea squirts are a great delicacy. Yummy!

Mama warns me to be aware of sharks, killer whales and passing boats, ships and mesh nets. "Hide from them," she warns.

Never had I been so concerned about our family's survival and declining population until recently when Mama and Bubu wandered into a gill mesh net, dangling from a fishing trawler. They got caught and were killed, and other relatives who inhabited the mangrove bay nearly died from a lack of food caused by chemical spills, which affect our food sources. Uncle Dug was killed by humans when he was swept ashore by a big wave.

I cry for my kind, "Help us! We are under threat! Protect us from the atrocious nets!"

Gone, gone will be my dugong family, if no one cares about protecting us. I will bark and I will whistle in my own way. I will join voices with you to advocate, but you humans have the power.

Please, protect me from extinction! Save me so that your next generation to can see me. Protect the seagrass from toxic chemicals! It is my food—my survival. To those friends who care, I leave it in your good hands.



Photo credit: Hayden Sade

Dugongs are related to Manatees, pictured here. Notice the difference in the shape of the tail of the manatee. The dugong's tail is fluked whereas the manatee tail is a rounded paddle shaped tail.

From human to dugong

By James Tuita (Open Category)

(Note: This myth is from Lau/Baelelea, North East Malaita, Solomon Islands)

Often, we Solomon Islanders seem to forget how important our culture is and how it helps sustain our local environment. Our ignorant behavior and failure to understand our traditional values hinder us from seeing the intimate connections that we as human beings have with the natural world around us. There are times we do not see the importance of our intangible cultural heritages, such as chants, riddles, poems, songs, myths and important sayings, as effective mechanisms that can protect our environment. For example, in Lau culture, children were taught superstitions such as this: *Never turn a starfish toward the sky or else the sky will fall and everyone will perish.*

Such superstitions would be shared all around with the aim of motivating children and even adults to help conserve the local environment. With such admonitions, children became so superstitious such that whenever they saw a starfish facing the sky they would quickly turn it back down. They always had the thought in mind that the sky would fall and that it would bring doom upon them and all Lau people. That is one of many cultural ways by which we, the Lau people, conserved our local environment. Another good example is that children were warned not to pull out the seagrass playfully because this would anger the dugongs, who would then overturn their canoes and drown them. This is because seagrass is main food source for dugongs, who are believed to be our relatives according to this myth. This superstition requires that we respect dugongs and not spoil the seagrass, which is their food. Seagrass is also an important food for Lau children, and such superstitions motivate the children to harvest it sustainably. This is how we, the Lau people, controlled the harvesting of seagrass.

Certainly, traditional concepts work effectively and help protect our environment. Superstitions are one way we ensure that edible marine resources, such as seagrass, are harvested sustainably and that we protect vulnerable creatures, such as starfish.

Elders passed on this and other myths through repeated oral transmission to remind kids of the importance of protecting the local environment. I am going to share a myth now. This myth reminds us not to hate dugongs in any way because our lives are closely linked with them, just like how we are linked to the local, natural environment. Another Lau superstition is that dugongs (*iatekwaa* in the Lau dialect) are our relatives, as manifested through the incarnation of Tekwaa the bride. Through this myth, we were always told to respect these creatures.

This is the story of Tekwaa, a newlywed bride who was envied by her mother-in-law for her beauty and work ethic.

As it is customary in Lau culture, during the first few days after the wedding ceremony, a new bride is expected to take up all household responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking, refilling the drinking water in bamboo containers, collecting firewood and gardening.

During her first few days after marriage with her husband's family, Tekwaa performed every task required of her—in both the house and the family garden. She seemed to understand everything in terms of a woman's roles, tasks and duties according to the marriage tradition in Lau culture.

While Tekwaa continued to work hard at her new responsibilities, her mother-in-law watched her closely. She envied Tekwaa's hard work and beauty, and she eventually became so jealous that she made an evil plot against her.

One day, during family time for gardening and collecting food, the mother-in-law set out her evil plan. After arriving at the garden, she began to delegate work to Tekwaa, outlining everything that needed to get done that day. She told Tekwaa to clear the garden and burn the leaves and twigs at the bottom of the stumps, and she made sure that Tekwaa would not have time to rest or even eat lunch.



Tekwaa worked from morning until evening, and she was not allowed to stop until the sun had set behind the mountains. After she had finished her day's work, she was told to carry back an *ite* (woven coconut leaf basket) that her mother-in-law had prepared. It was full of root crops, like taro, yam and potato, and it had firewood in it as well.

Tekwaa was exhausted, but she had to follow her mother-in-law's orders. She did not know about her mother-in-law's evil plot, so she could not know that by following her orders she was actually allowing her mother-in-law's plot to succeed. Along the tracks that lead through the hills and valleys, one can imagine the struggle Tekwaa had to endure while carrying the heavy basket. It was so hard for her that she could barely pace her steps evenly. This was something she had never experienced when she was with her family. Despite this, however, she made her way along the path until she reached home.

As soon as Tekwaa arrived home with her load, the mother-in-law told her to unpack everything and start cooking. She did not allow Tekwaa to rest or even catch her breath. Just imagine being tired from a hard day's work, carrying a heavy load and then starting cooking—it would be exhausting. Yet Tekwaa did as her mother-in-law said, and without complaining.

When dinner was finally over, the family went to rest, but Tekwaa could not sleep. Her soul was weary, her mind was troubled and every inch of her body hurt. She tossed and turned most of the night and only caught some sleep in the early hours of the morning.

When daylight came, the family got ready to go back to the garden to complete their tasks. Just as she did the day before, the mother-in-law delegated tasks to Tekwaa and forced her to start her daily chores. Tekwaa obeyed and did as she was told. She went back to the garden and did her chores by clearing the garden, burning the stumps and then subdividing the areas for ploughing and planting. It was very hot that day, as the unfriendly sun did not sympathize with anyone working. This made Tekwaa very uncomfortable and tired, but she forced herself to finish all the work that been allocated to her for fear of been scolded, since she was under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law.

When it was time to go home, the mother-in-law gave her another *ite* to carry. This time, she hid a big boulder of flint at the bottom. Her aim was to overwork the tired wife. Yet without complaint, Tekwaa again carried the load. But the weight was even heavier than the day before, and this made her suspicious. The weight was so overwhelming that she stumbled along the path and often asked her mother-in-law if she could rest. But her mother-in-law only yelled at her, saying they had no time to rest.

Upon arriving, Tekwaa was still suspicious. She checked the load and to her surprise she found the heavy boulder of flint at the bottom of the sack, carefully hidden by the taro, yams and firewood. When she saw this, she immediately grew upset and angry. She shouted at her mother-in-law. "Why are you so cruel? You are so malicious and wicked, and you make me suffer! Is this how you are going to treat me my whole life when I will be with your family? I have to leave your family and go. It is no use staying here with you because you treat me so cruelly."

At that moment, Tekwaa could not think of any other way to heal her broken heart other than just to leave. She could feel the agony not only from the heavy loads that she had been carrying but also from the psychological trauma she had received from her mistreatment by her mother-in-law. What a tragedy for Tekwaa! She was a young maiden and did not dream that such misfortune could ruin her marriage.

Tekwaa cried bitterly and left. She went to the hills and followed the windy pathway that led to Lau Lagoon on the coast of northeast Malaita. She continued along the path until she reached the seafront. There, she stood on the rock (*fourafu*) that faced the lagoon and let out a final cry of agony. Then she jumped into the sea to kill herself.

The instant she touched the water, Tekwaa transformed into a dugong. This is the incarnation story that intimately ties the Lau and Baelelea people to the dugong.

From that day on, dugongs have been called *iatekwaa*: *ia* means fish while *tekwaa*, of course, is the name of the young wife. This is the reason we, the Lau people, have such high respect for dugongs and do not hate them in any way. To this day, we the Lau people of northeast Malaita still regard dugongs as our relatives, who evolved from the transformation of Tekwaa.

Let us not forget how our culture helps protect our local environment. Many of our myths, such the one about Tekwaa, contain many moral lessons we can learn from. In this myth, we learn that envy is bad for our family or even the community we live in. We can see that the repercussions of hatred can lead to family separation and even death.

Whatever happened in this story, the most important thing is that the myth itself helps us see our intimate connection to our local environment. Only by seeing such links between us and the nature world around us can have the will, respect and tendency to protect all of the natural world, such as starfish, seagrass and, especially, dugongs, which are vulnerable to extinction.



Donty the dugong

By Anthony Ajiomea (Open Category)

As the sun rose, a mother dugong was about to give birth to a calf. Not knowing whether it would be male or female, she was escorted to the birth rock in the Pacific Ocean. There she gave birth to a little male calf.

"Isn't he handsome?" said Grandma Dagi Dugong.

"Of course he is," said Grandpa Dagi Dugong.

After an hour of admiring the little calf, they named him Donty.

Donty grew up to be a very strong and active dugong in his community. He helped a lot of dugongs with various hard and impossible tasks—many that an ordinary dugong could not do.

One day, a huge rock fell from the upper seafloor and trapped an old dugong by the name of Devi under it. The other young dugongs tried to rescue him but could not. Luckily Donty came along and used his huge tail to roll the rock away from old Devi.

"Donty, that's amazing!" cried one of the young dugongs.

"You are our hero, Donty!" squealed the lady dugongs.

Although he was given so much praise and attention, Donty was humble. He accepted their praises and then swam away in search of another adventure.

One day, while Donty was relaxing on the seafloor, a blot of black shadow splashed into the sea above him. He looked up and saw strange creatures who were speaking in a strange language. Curiosity swept over Donty, and he wanted to find out more about these creatures.

All of a sudden, a huge net covered Donty. He struggled but could not escape, because the net was too strong. All he knew was that the net was heading toward the surface of the sea. There, in the huge floating rock, the strangers took him out of the net and placed him in a cage. At that moment, Donty knew he was caught and would not see his family again.

Meanwhile, under the surface, Donty's family were searching everywhere for him. Just as they were about to give up, a little dugong by the name of Dege spotted the strange floating object above them. He swam up and to his astonishment he saw his friend and their hero, Donty, stuck in a cage with a strange creature standing next to him.

Dege swam back in a flash to the community to inform them about the capture of their hero. Upon hearing the news and the description of the stranger, Grandpa Dagi told them the strangers were called humans and it would not be possible for Donty to escape. Tears fell from the eyes of the herd of dugongs. They knew that if they were in trouble, Donty would risk his life to save them. They recalled Donty's helpful acts and bravery and finally decided that they were willing to lay down their lives to save him.

"Whether we live or die, we must struggle to set Donty free," they cried.

Dege and Devi wasted no time. They swam aggressively toward the ship. BOOM! They both hit the boat with their huge bodies again and again. These loud booms took the captain and crew by surprise and they became terrified. They stood at the deck head and were shocked to see hundreds of dugongs swimming around the ship. During all the commotion, Donty looked up helplessly from where he was sleeping and saw Dege, with their dugong community swimming around the ship.



Prize Tepuke 18

“Release the dugong at once!” shouted the captain.

“Yes, captain, before our ship is smashed by the angry dugongs out there!” yelled one of the crew.

The terrified crew wasted no time unlocking Donty’s cage and released him into the sea. They pulled up their anchor and sailed away at fast as they could.

As the light dimmed into the horizon, Donty reunited with his family and a huge party was thrown for his return and the bravery of the whole dugong community. The celebration ended with a talk from the wise old Devi, who had these wise words for Donty:

“As you did for us, we will do the same for you. We are dugongs and our generation is facing extinction. We have to fight to protect each other.”

From that day onward, all dugongs have had a responsibility to always protect each other, even if it means sacrificing their own lives to save another’s.

Freddy the dugong and his two friends

By Rowena Wemahanua (Open Category)



It was a lovely luminous day, the sky was clear and the sun was shining brightly. Freddy the dugong and his friend, Thomas the turtle, were swimming closely above the seagrass in the calm coastal waters.

While they were swimming, Freddy asked Thomas what he thought about ocean pollution and marine species being threatened because of human activities such as fishing nets and oil spills from illegal logging operations.

"It is wrong," Thomas answered. "These people should be fined heavily and prosecuted for their illegal actions."

Just then they saw a little yellow fish swimming along tranquilly toward them. When they looked at it more carefully, they realized it was just Paul.

"Hey, Paul! How are you?" Thomas shouted.

"Fine!" Paul shouted back. "What are you two up to?"

"We are discussing the issue of pollution and endangered marine species like us dugongs," Freddy answered.

"Hey, I just got an idea," Paul said. "Let's stop these illegal actions on the land by holding up some cardboard signs and banners with a slogan that says, *Protect dugongs and their food, the seagrass*. We can hold them up until they stop."

"Okay," Freddy and Thomas said together.

So off they swam toward the surface of the water. When they were almost a meter away from the shore, they could see people carefully straightening out their nets and preparing to go fishing. Paul was ready to swim closer toward them when he noticed an oily liquid substance.

"Swim away quickly!" Paul yelled.

"Why?" Freddy asked.

But Paul did not respond. Instead, he swam away as fast as he could, and the others followed. When they were as far away as possible, Freddy asked him, "Why did we swim away so fast?"

"Oil is dangerous for us marine creatures," Paul said. "It is filling the sea and polluting marine species and our ecosystems. We must stop it right now before it damages the whole marine ecosystem."

As they were talking, they could see oil spilling on the seashores from illegal logging operations, so they continued with their plan of holding up cardboard signs.

They swam farther away from the shore and found a spot where there was no oil on the surface. There, they lifted their cardboard signs high so that the bad people on the shore could see them. Then they started shouting, "Protect dugongs and the seagrass, their food!" They did this again the next day.

After several weeks had passed, some of their friends and other marine species joined the protest. Together they tried to combat illegal logging and also force the fishers to release dugongs who had gotten tangled up in their fishing nets.

One day, as Freddy and his friends were protesting, their childhood friend Mr. Mike the red fish swam past and saw what they were doing. He became curious and asked them what their protest was about.

Thomas the turtle pointed to the oil spills on the surface of water and replied in his thunderous voice saying, "We have rallied against the bad people on the land who are doing illegal logging activities that have caused negative impacts on the land and the sea."

Mike grew interested and concerned. "Oh, yes! I can see oil on the surface. What can I do to help?"



Freddy then explained to Mike that they had rallied together by holding up cardboard signs and shouting at the top of their voices so that the bad people on the land could see and hear them. They had even tried to drive the oily substance from the surface by using cardboard, but it was too difficult.

“If you would like to help us protest, gather your friends and join us,” Freddy said. “This will help all marine species who are endangered, especially us dugongs and our feeding grounds.”

So Mr. Mike gathered his friends, and afterward the protest continued with all marine species invading the area and shouting in thunderous voices, “Stop illegal logging activities! Save and protect dugongs and seagrass, their food!”

Banners and cardboards were hovering up in the air. All kinds of marine animals—large and small, fat and skinny, long and short—gathered together to support Freddy and his friends.

Meanwhile, on land the land owners realized the negative impacts of their activities and decided that the logging company had to be stopped and driven off their property. After being forced from the land and chased away by the land owners, the bad people removed all their property and left the area, searching for other areas to log.

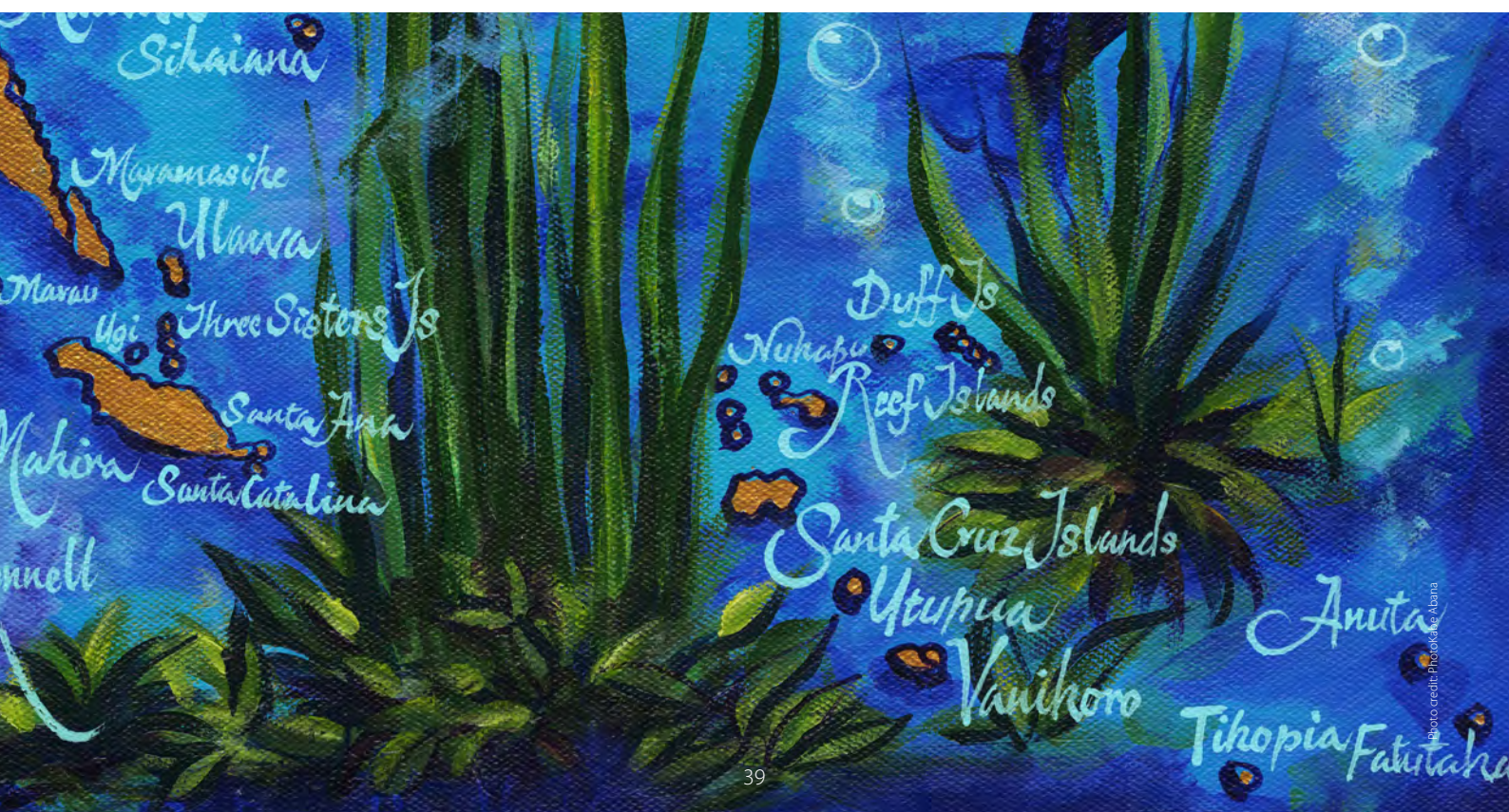
Upon seeing what had just happened, all of the marine species shouted with joy. “We have done it! We have done it!”

After the commotion had died down, the marine species came and thanked Freddy and his friends for taking such a bold stand to fight for all endangered species, especially dugongs and seagrass.

“Thank you, thank you!” they shouted in gratitude. In return, Freddy praised his friends and thanked all of them for coming together to fight against the bad people.

He ended his speech saying, “Without all of you, this would not have been achieved. But with all your efforts, we knew our protest would be successful.”

There was a great celebration afterward, and the marine species celebrated their success by cleaning the coastal waters and planting fresh rows of seagrass in the ocean, never to be polluted again by logging.



Let me live

By George Koala (Open Category)



Let our dugongs live, this is their world
Let our dugongs live, they belong here
Let our dugongs live, the ocean needs them
Let our dugongs live, the future needs them
Let our dugongs live, Solomon Islands needs them
Save our dugongs!

Conserving dugongs and seagrasses

By Hazel Weape (Open Category)

IBM

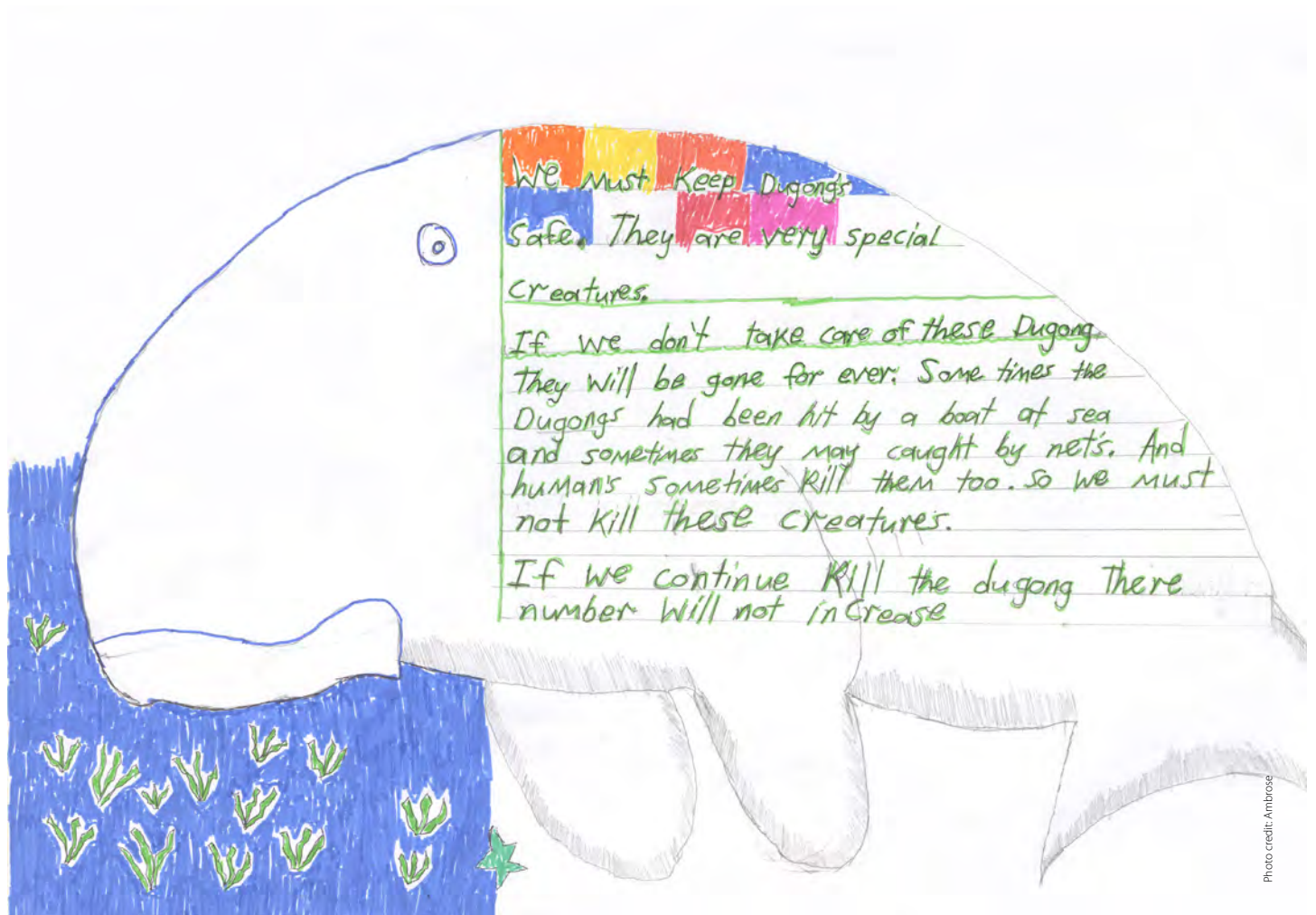


Photo credit: Ambrose

O let the good people hear this news
Dugongs and seagrass are calling
Why are you people forgetting that?
It is important
You were created as a good steward
Let's go forward
Responsibility has been laid on the shoulder
Stop wondering
Old and young are alike
Together let's protect
Dugongs and seagrass
They are calling for their helper
Let's answer

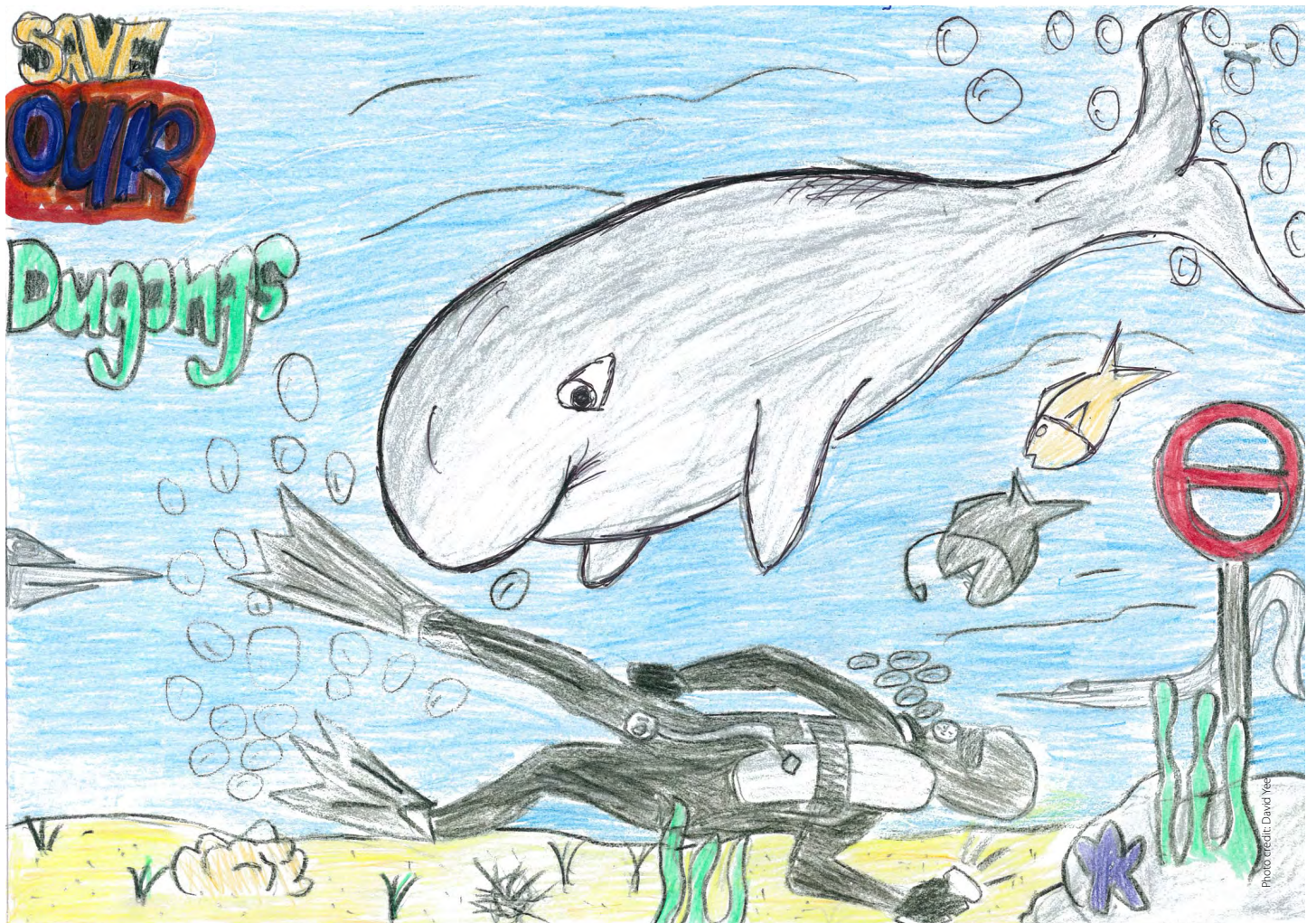
Why? You wonder
They are nearly extinct
Please! Think

Conservation is important and at hand
Let's do it
Plants and creatures on land and on sea
Must increase
O let's consider this important issue
It's valuable
Dugongs and seagrass are calling in danger
Faster!
Why are you delaying their time?
It's time
From the top to the bottom, let's bear the burden
Let no one be laden
There is a prize for doers of this world
They reap a good reward.

Keep our dugongs safe

By Ambrose

Kukum SDA



We must keep dugongs safe
They are special creatures
If we do not take care of dugongs, they will be gone forever
Sometimes dugongs get hit by boats at sea
Sometimes they get caught in nets
And sometimes humans kill them
We must not kill these creatures
If we continue to kill dugongs, their numbers will not increase.

The dugong poster

By Che Porowae

Chung Wah School



One fine Sunday, as I was strolling along the shore, I came across a tree. On the tree was a strange poster, right up on the highest branch. I climbed up the tree, curious, wanting to read it. I was tired by the time I got up to the poster, but I managed to read it. It was about dugongs endangered by hunting and sea pollution. I started to read the information on the poster:

Dugongs are medium-sized marine mammals, also called sea cows, that feed on seagrass. They are found in warm coastal waters from the Western Pacific to the eastern coast of Africa.

But the next piece of information scared me:

Dugongs were nearly hunted to extinction in the 18th century.

Before I was able to read any further, the branch I stood on broke and I plunged into the sea. I was about to splash into the water when I saw a blurry ashen color in front of me. Immediately, a shark came to mind, so I quickly swam ashore and scrambled onto the beach. I was panting, glad that I was not going to be shark food. After a breath of relief, I took a closer look at the blurry ashen figure in the water. To my surprise, it was a dugong calf waiting for its mother. I wondered to myself how big the dugong calf would grow. I climbed up the same tree to look at the poster again:

Dugongs can grow up to 10 meters long.

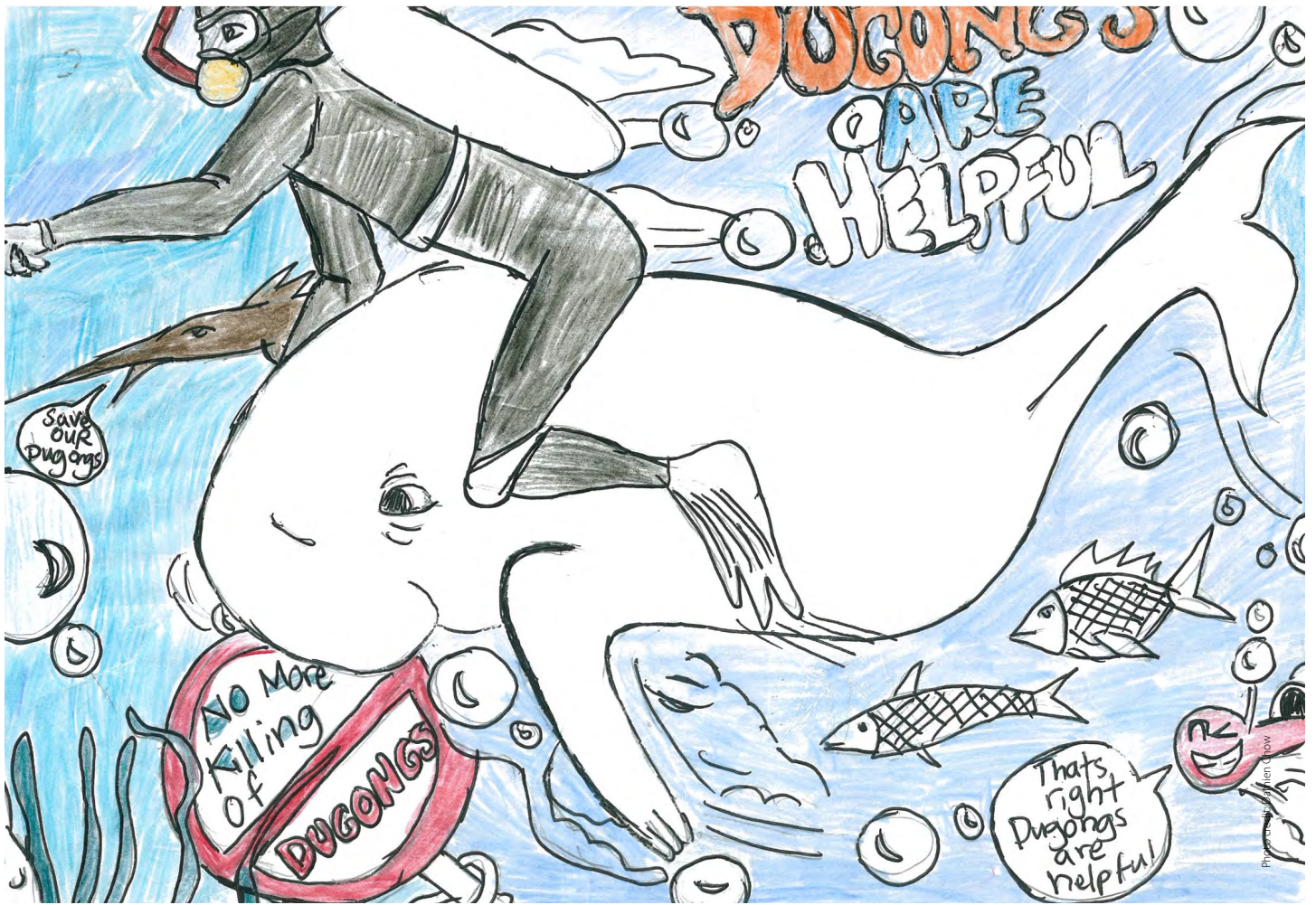
From the tree, I looked down and saw that the mother dugong had now joined its calf. Then I read the last piece of information:

The number of dugongs is decreasing rapidly around the world. We must save these gentle creatures.

This fact made me emotional and I began to think of the calf's future. I thought to myself, I hope they remain free in the sea and are never hunted again.

Protecting dugongs

By Azalyn Naqu
Florence Young Secondary



Dugongs are medium-sized marine mammals that can be found in the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean, Eastern Africa, Australia and the Pacific. They are also known as sea cows that feed on seagrass and plants that grow in abundance in tropical shallow waters. Nowadays, the dugong population has dropped dramatically because of chemical pollution, overharvesting and increased coastal development. Since dugongs face extinction, it is important to protect them so that we can preserve this unique marine species.

In this essay, I will discuss three ways which that I believe can help protect dugongs: (1) promote awareness programs about dugongs and their threatened environment, (2) prevent pollution in the sea and (3) discourage development in coastal areas.

Promoting awareness programs about dugongs and their threatened environment is one way to protect dugongs. Most people do not know dugongs are going extinct, so experts on dugongs should organize awareness programs to teach people about this threatened marine species within our environment. Examples of awareness programs could include putting up posters around our towns and villages, experts giving educational talks on the radio or in our communities, and organizing competitions involving the public to discuss and learn about dugongs. It is important to target people living in coastal villages, coastal areas and islands, because they live near the dugongs' ecosystem and so can help to effectively protect them. Involving people in awareness programs will help them learn about the importance of protecting dugongs. As the saying goes, "Teach me and I'll forget. Involve me and I'll learn."

Another way we can protect dugongs is preventing pollution in the sea. Chemical substances, acids and garbage that is thrown into the sea can all cause sea pollution. This results in seagrass becoming unhealthy, which in turns threatens the lives of dugongs because they depend on seagrass for their survival. The shortages of seagrass in coastal areas force dugongs farther ashore and could eventually lead to them getting killed or accidentally caught by

fishing boats. Preventing pollution involves practicing proper waste disposal methods within our homes, schools and communities. Dangerous substances like chemicals, acids and nonbiodegradable wastes should be disposed properly in appropriate dump sites. Recycling nondegradable wastes like tins and plastics would also help. Such materials would then remain useful yet not contribute to the pollution of our surrounding environment. The government or local councils should pass laws that regulate waste disposal in the sea. This way, the public would be obligated by the law to protect the sea and surrounding environment. Fines could also be imposed through laws to penalize people who breach them. People should be encouraged to become responsible wardens of our surrounding environment, especially the sea. This would include picking up any garbage thrown either in the sea or on land or talking to people who treat the sea as their dumping site. Preventing sea pollution is an important way of keeping dugongs safe, so we must act now.

Discouraging major developments in coastal areas is a third way we can protect dugongs, because these developments are a major contributor to sea pollution. When a company wants to build a shopping complex near a coastal site, it might need to clear mangroves or coastal plants surrounding the area to build it. Such developments can frighten dugongs away from their natural habitat. The noise pollution from the construction might scare them or the waste pollution might affect the production of seagrass, which dugongs rely on for food. As a result, dugongs could become homeless and hungry, even in their natural habitat. We can discourage such development by enforcing laws that do not allow developments along coastal areas near or in the habitats of dugongs. This way, we can help protect the sanctuary of dugongs and their future existence.

To conclude, the lives of dugongs are at risk, and it is our responsibility to protect them. If we do not act now, then dugongs will eventually become extinct. It takes not only the help of the marine officers and organizations but every individual living in our country to work together and make safer havens for our dugongs.

Help save the dugongs!

Please take care of the sea

By Claren Gomora

Chung Wah School



I am a dugong, also known as a sea cow.

I am endangered.

I am a herbivore, eating only seagrass.

My mom and dad eat seagrass too, up to 40 kilograms every day.

How weird is it that sailors think I am a mermaid

Every time I swim pass their sailing ship.

I stay in the water for six minutes then race up to the surface to get some air.

I am afraid to die and I am always careful when I race up to the surface of the water

Because who knows, there might be a net waiting for me up there to strangle me!

I do not want to die. I could drown easily. Yes, that is right, I am like you humans. I also swim slowly.

If the sea is polluted, it will be bad for us marine creatures. We are scared.

Are you sad that you will not see us again? I am!

Females give birth to a calf every five years, so it would be easy for us to become extinct.

Please take care of the sea.

My pet dugong

By Jones

Kukum Seventh Day Adventist School



Once upon a time, my father and I went to the beach. We saw a dugong and ran to the shore to get closer. I thought how nice it would be if we could take it home and put it in a tank as a pet.

My life as a dugong

By Sherin Hamutagi

Chung Wah School

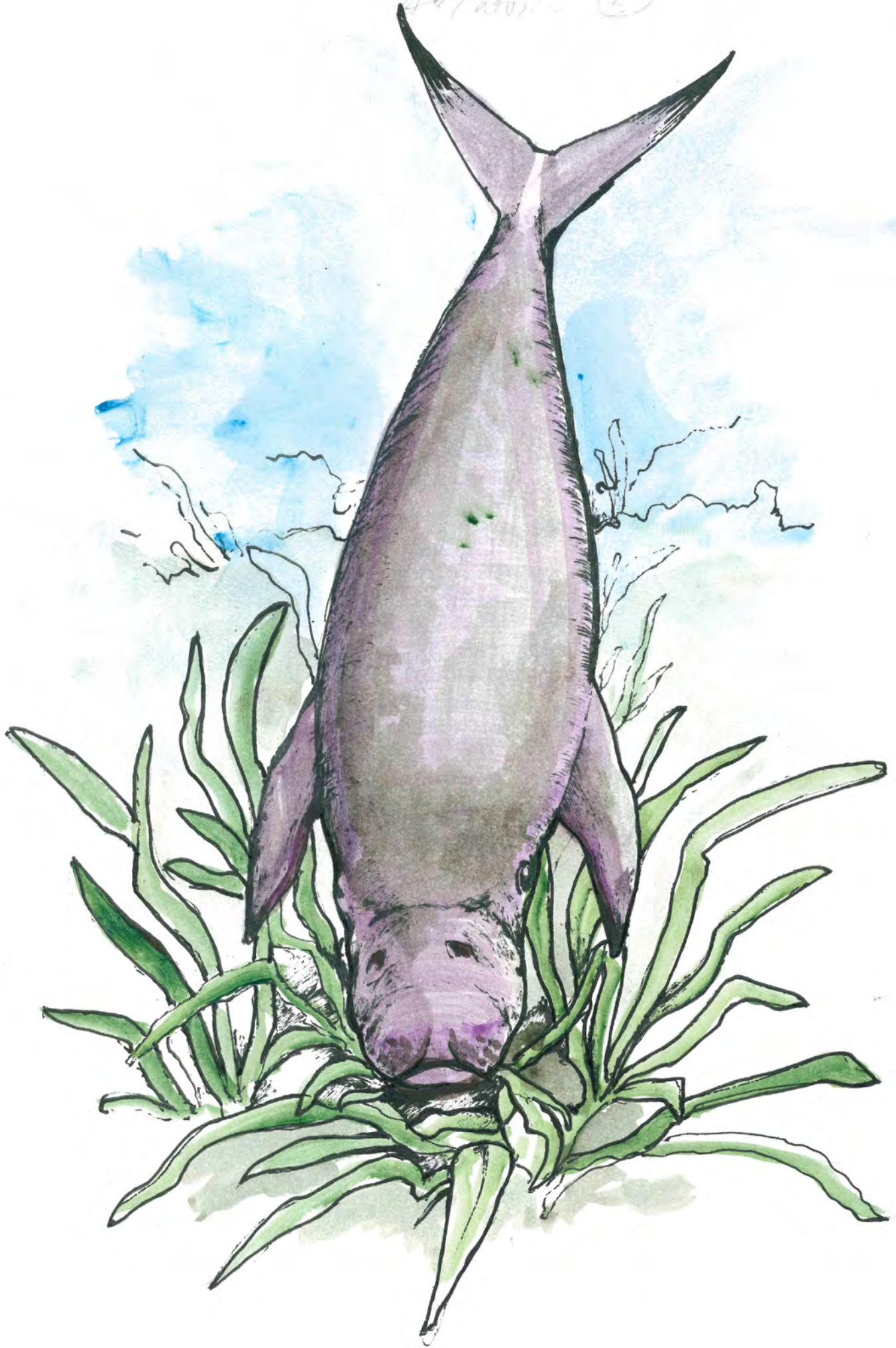
Hi there. I am Mrs. Dugong and I have a little adorable calf. I am a widow. My husband was killed by divers when we went looking for food. I rushed with my baby calf to a hole under a rock and watched as they took my husband away on a boat. I often wonder why they hunt my species.

One night, I went looking for seagrass for dinner while my calf stayed safely hidden under the huge rock. I heard the rumbling of a boat's engine and quickly hid. The people spoke an unusual language, nothing that I understood. As I looked up, I saw them holding different tools and realized with a fright that those tools were what killed my husband. I was so frightened that I quickly swam off to check on my baby. Thankfully, he was okay, playing by himself.

As days went past, I no longer saw other family members who used to swim by for a visit. I became scared. My calf would cry and beg me, "Please, Mummy, do not leave me alone. I need you in my life." It broke my heart and I assured him, asking him not to cry. I became emotional when I thought about his future. "What will happen to him when I am gone?"

This is a plea to humans. We dugongs do not want to become extinct. We are the same as you. We have families to take care of. Stop hunting my kind! We want to live just like you!

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My dugong life

By Summer Campbell

Chung Wah School

My three brothers and I lived with our parents in the blue sea under a huge rock. We had a happy life, swimming and eating seagrass, until one night everything changed.

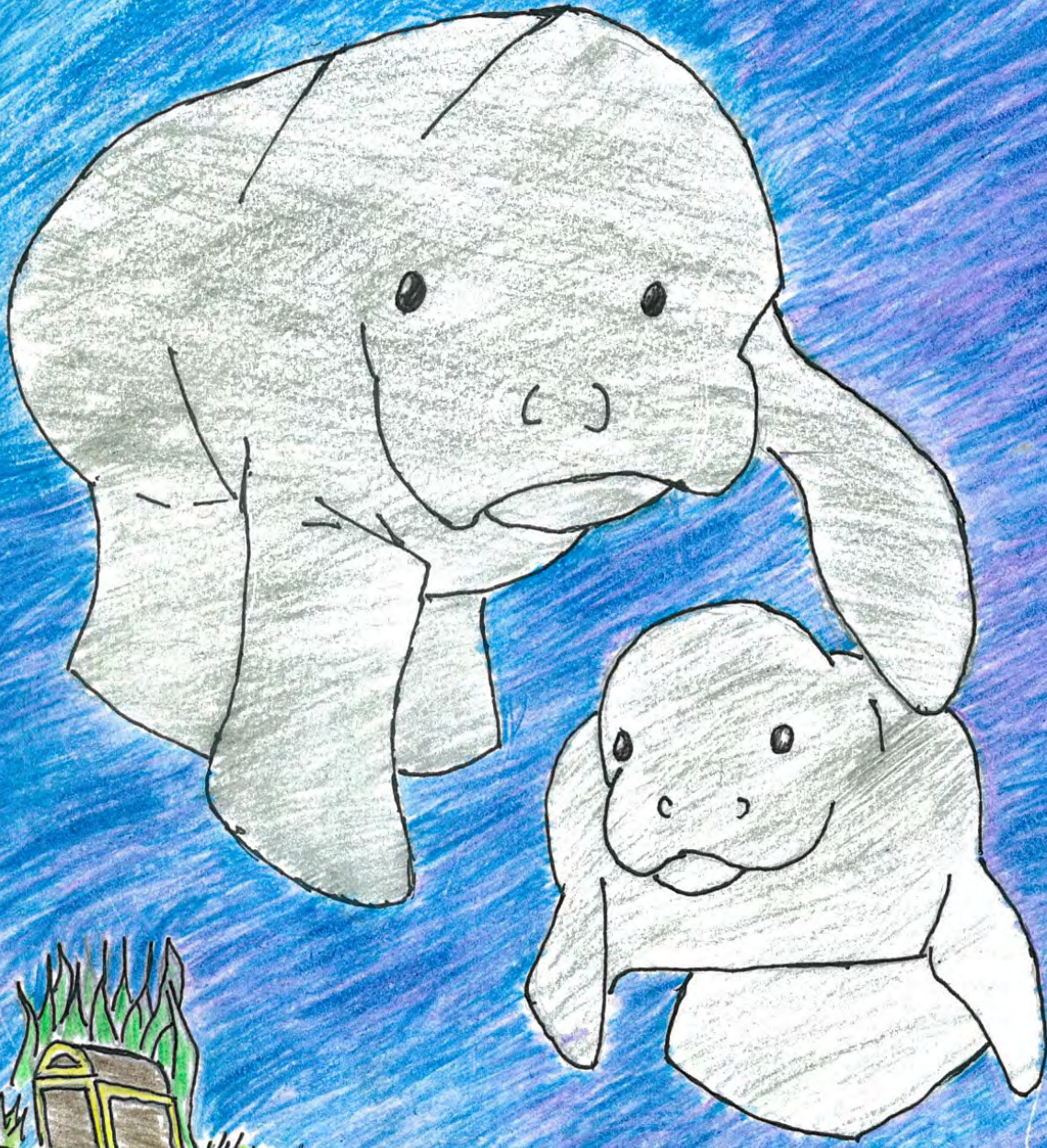
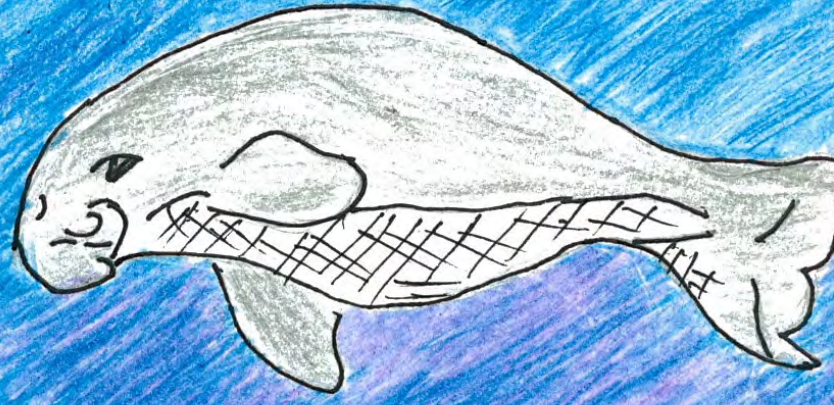
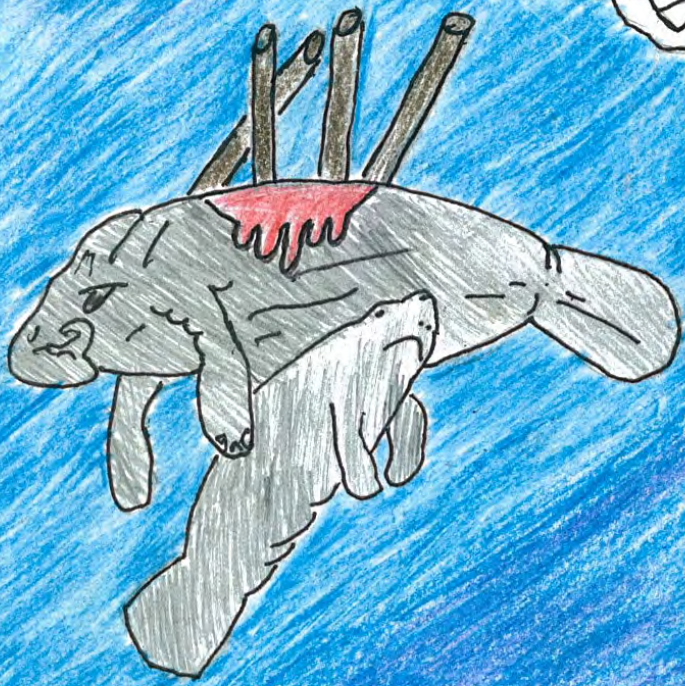
During that fateful night, my dad did his checks around the rock, just as he does every night. This time, however, something was different. He saw something strange—animals we knew as “people.” They were slowly but carefully approaching him. Immediately, he started swimming away from the strangers, shouting, “Help! Help!” But he was not fast enough and the strangers captured him.

We rushed out quickly, but to our horror the people had taken my dad to their boat. Sadly, I never saw my loving dad again. Life was not the same after my dad was captured, and my brothers and I sometimes had to stay by ourselves while our mum went searching for seagrass.

Years passed and we ended up living alone after the passing of our mum. We would go searching for food in pairs, while one would stay home and keep a lookout. One day, as my elder brother and I were heading out to the seagrass meadow, we heard a strange noise. Suddenly, out of nowhere, two ugly looking people came toward us. We tried to swim fast but they caught up to us. A spear came speeding toward us and killed my elder brother, who fell onto the seafloor. I wanted to help him, but before he died my brother told me to keep going until I reached the huge rock. I was so scared. Checking in on my youngest brother, I found him sleeping soundly. I was thrilled to see him safe, but I was also sad that my older brother was killed. When my youngest brother awoke, I had a difficult time telling him about what had happened, and he broke down crying.

As time passed, things were not the same anymore. No dugongs came by swimming, laughing or talking to each other. It was as if everyone had gone. My species was becoming extinct and I worried about what the future would be like for my dugong calves. My one wish is that one day humans will understand us and leave us alone.

Please
save
our
Dugongs



My life as a dugong

By Victoria Goh

Chung Wah School

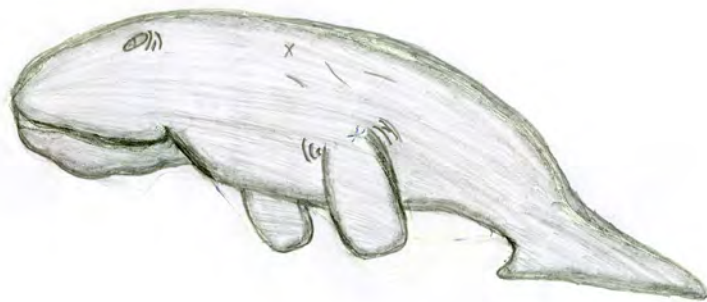


Wayne. chipu. Kavora
STOP

Killing
Dugongs

Name: Wayne chipu kavora

school: Kukum S.D.A Primary school



My name is Victoria and I am a dugong (aka sea cow).
I am a creature who resides in the deep blue sea.
We live a very exciting life and every day we play our favorite games.
We also go for a swim in search of seagrass to eat.
One day some strange creature came and took half of my family.
That was when I started hiding.
We dugongs are almost extinct because of these strange creatures.
Maybe in 10 years' time we dugongs will be extinct.
If people do not hunt us, we will be fine.
Because of dugong hunting, we are getting fewer every year.
Please help save dugongs!

Poems

Dugong poem

By Finross Samo

Kukum Seventh Day Adventist School

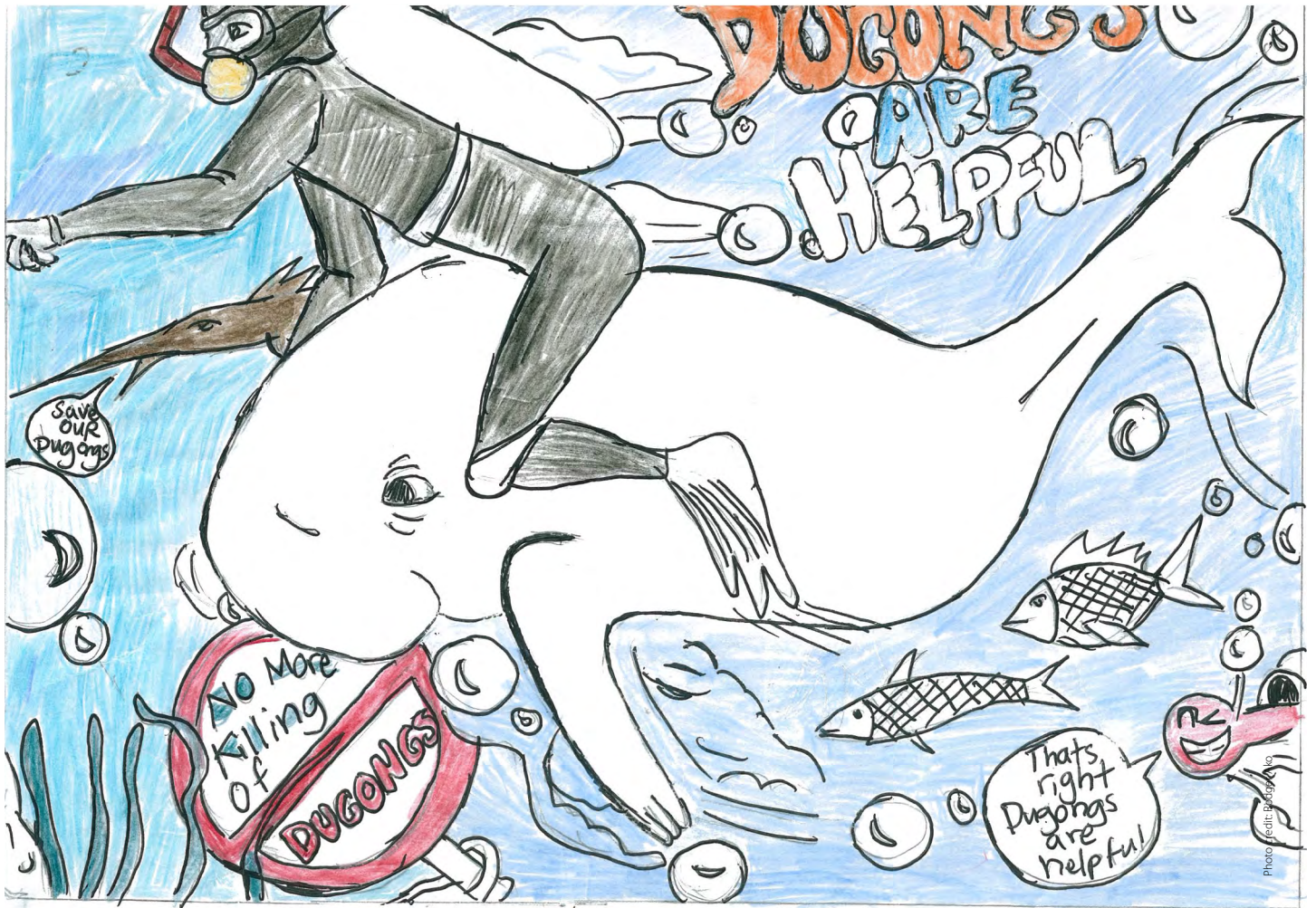


From Kukum Adventist primary school.



Dugong, dugong, dugong
Dugongs are big mammals living in the ocean
Sometimes people want to kill dugongs
Dugong are part of our culture
Some provinces love dugongs as their God
Dugongs are herbivores
Dugongs eat seagrass in the ocean
Some fish love to swim with dugongs
Dugongs are beautiful mammals
Dugongs are great swimmers
Dugong, dugong, dugong.

Dugong
By Hins Wong
Chung Wah School



- D**- Dependent on seagrass communities for subsistence.
- U**- Used to be hunted for their meat.
- G**- Great cultural significance in several countries.
- O**- On endangered species and banned international trade lists.
- N**- Nails on their flippers.
- G**- Generally found in warm waters around the coast.
- S**- Sighted in the western part of the gulf, usually, with a small and declining eastern population.

Dugong poem

By Masalina Arumae

Chung Wah School



- D** - Dugongs are mammals in the sea.
- U** - Under the sea they swim gracefully.
- G** - Going up to the surface every six minutes.
- O** - On the surface they take a breath.
- N** - Nets are a threat.
- G** - Getting extinct really soon.
- S** - Seagrass is their food from morning to afternoon.
- A** - After three to seven years they give birth.
- R** - Related to elephants.
- E** - Eats seagrass every day.

- M** - Male dugongs develop tusks.
- A** - A dugong can be seen in coastal waters.
- M** - Most dugongs can swim 14 miles per hour.
- M** - Many people want to devour them.
- A** - An animal species that is easy to kill.
- L** - Lots of dugongs are endangered now.
- S** - So please save them.

Dugong poem

By Rosina

Kukum Seventh Day Adventist School



Dugongs, dugong, dugong
Dugongs are mammals
Dugongs are graceful swimmers
Dugongs are grayish-brown
Dugongs are herbivores
Dugongs have flat tails and flippers like whales
Dugongs are often known as sea cows
Dugongs are good friends
Dugong, dugong, dugong

Do not kill the dugong

By Yuna

Chung Wah School



Do not kill dugongs

They are mammals that look after our oceans

They live in the ocean

Growing to 11 feet and weighing 2000 pounds

Dugongs are large and gentle

They swim around sometimes

They like to take their time

We must not throw rubbish in the ocean to keep it clean for dugongs

Lady of the sea

By Vincent Noma (Open Category)

Oh! Mama Dugong
This land you equally belong to
Created by the Holy One
In Genesis 1:21
Cousin of Manatee
You whom we share our sea
Slow in motion and humble
Our ocean cow mammal
Once abound in our bay shallows
From Shortland to Vanikoro
Your population boomed
Your dignity blossomed
Your kids held a destiny
Due to total sovereignty
And rules of democracy
Which was shared equality
In the animal kingdom
On the platform, "shalom"
In pride you thrived
With rights never derived
Munched on seaweed pasture
The villas of your leisure
Glided freely without tempest fears
For the past thousand years
Where howling blasts hurried past
Gave music to lull you to sleep fast
And virgin reefs and beaches
Were your museums of riches
No fishing nets and boats
Gave you threats to be caught
No speedboat propellers
Scratched your young fellers
No human careless attitudes
Trimmed you in multitudes
No oil spill and acid rain
Turned your fields barren
No human-made pollution
Jeopardized your procreation
No scorched corals
Signaled omens of funerals

Oh! You majestic ocean queen
Grazing on the seagrass green
Chewing huge quantities a day
In that rich foliage in our bay
And flipping your tails away
Glide through reefs highway
In our harbor shallows
Never meant for your death gallows
But your feasting café
As in Suava Bay

Or floating under the moon
As in Lau Lagoon
Where you can be patted
But not arrested
Ride through its flora and fauna
To greet turtles and barracuda
A home of your birthrights
To perform your traditional rights

Oh! Dear lady of the sea
It's our money-craving disease
Makes you an endangered species
Threatens your reef amenities
Oil scorches your seagrass pastures
Robs you of your life treasure
Brown dye your fresh water
As factory outlets run closer
Depleting your aquatic plants
And denying your foraging hunts
Crushing you with speedboats
During breathing taking floats
Entangle your kids in fishing nets
Without grief or regrets
Slaughtered not from confrontation
But drawn by money fascination

Behold! This mama is rare
We must tender her care
For today, this herbivore
Mustn't be the dinosaur
To vanish from our shore
We must all take heed
That she does not need
Love and respect as before
From Shortland's reef cores
To the Vanikoro shores
For she's our fellow native
Not for reckless captive
But lady of the wildlife
That needs to be alive
Cut the catches by a huge limit
Our stakeholders must permit
God gave them survival right too
Yes! In Genesis 1:22



Dear dugong

By Javin Pogo (Open Category)



I can see the world changing
Development charging like a fiery chariot,
Birds, mammals, fish and all creatures are driven from their colony
If they were human, they would stage a mutiny
From a distant view
I can catch a rare glimpse of you
Who? You...yeah you!
Your rareness makes you the world's most expensive meat
You are sold for a kilo at 150 American Dollars, the world's strongest currency
The current flows ever year
So your death is near
Forced out of your comfort zone
Like the air in the ozone
You are looking for your beloved seagrass
But it is gone
Destroyed by the sand of pollution
By the advance of the creature that has technology
Yours faithfully
Friend

Promoting healthy seagrass and protecting dugongs in Solomon Islands

By Peter S Haeo

What is a dugong?

A dugong is one of God's creations. It is often called a sea cow even though it has a snout like a pig. As a sea mammal like dolphins and whales, it is warm-blooded and gives milk to its young.

Our environment

We live in an ecosystem that consists of all living things co-existing together. These living things include both plants and animals, which depend on each other for survival. If one part of the system is changed, it affects the whole system.

Lessons learned from the past

During my childhood in the 1960s, my hobby was to watch dugongs from a mangrove tree. In some parts of Western Province, such as Marovo Lagoon, Roviana Lagoon, Tetepara Islands, Kolombangara around Vanga Point, Nusatupe Islands and parts of Faoro in the Shortland Islands, there were often reports of these mammals grazing on seagrass along the white sands.

The sex of a dugong can be distinguished easily. The male dugong can be identified by its beard and sex organ, which are similar to that of a human being, while the female dugong has a similar-looking sex organ and features to a female human as well. Both sexes have hair around their "armpits" and their sex organs. This distinctive feature is so similar to that of human beings that our village called dugongs "half *mere* and half man" in our village," which means "half man and half woman" in English.

In the Shortland Island dialect, dugongs are often referred to as *tou*, but the word is considered sacred and we are not allowed to say it aloud. It is believed that if the name is said aloud, dugongs will sneeze as a way to indicate that they are being monitored. They will then leave their habitat and swim away from the sandy beaches into the deep sea. From observation, I saw that dugongs do "sneeze" like how my grandfather described when they come up to the surface of the water to breathe.

In Solomon Islands, Western Province has the highest number of logging companies operating on various islands. I saw this firsthand when I went on vacation in 2016. One of the places I visited was Fauro, located on Shortland Island near Bougainville. It was an island torn between the tribes from Shortland and the tribes from Buin in South Bougainville. In Faoro, there was a logging company that had been operating for a few years. The impacts from this activity caused a lot of environmental problems. It was even reported that most of the sea mammals had moved from their habitat and settled in a new location.

Dugong meat as a source of protein

The first time I ate dugong meat was in 1969, when I was still in primary school. It was prepared by a group of divers who had hunted a female dugong in secret. The meat was placed on a special rack and smoked in the kitchen for at least a week, which is the traditional cooking method of Shortland Islanders to preserve meat for months. Other meat that can be smoked include fish, cattle and turtle.

Once the meat was ready, the divers falsely advertised it as *levers yandina bulumakau*, meaning "meat of cow," and they sold it for 10 dollars per smoked parcel. This sign attracted a huge crowd of meat lovers, and soon it was sold out. My dad and I were also attracted to the advertisement and bought some for ourselves. While we were enjoying the delicious smoked meat, an announcement boomed over the PA system that said the meat we had just bought was not *bulumakau* but *tou*.



← This stick indicates
OTO FATIM ASI
MEANS PROTECTING FISHING
GROUND

We were shocked. We did not know it was dugong meat because it looked exactly like beef after being smoked for a week. The only way you can tell the difference between the two is when the meat is freshly slaughtered—beef is heavy and dark-red in color, while dugong meat is slightly lighter red in color with white skin.

The importance of dugongs

Dugongs are sea mammals that have abrasive skin, like a wood file or rasp. They are generally friendly but can become aggressive and drown people who mistreat them by suffocating them underwater. Nowadays, dugongs are protected by the Fisheries Management Act, and it is important that people respect the act for the good of our nation because dugongs are quickly declining in number. By respecting the act and protecting dugongs, not harming or hunting them, their population will increase. This will give our children the chance to see what a dugong looks like.

Seagrass for dugongs

Seagrass is special because it is the main food source for dugongs, turtles, rabbit fish, puffer fish and sea urchins, as well as the main habitat for many small fish. However, sea urchins, sea turtles and, especially, rabbit fish can damage this plant.

In warm months, mostly August to September, rabbit fish can be found in seagrass. During this time, they overeat the seagrass, leaving it overharvested. This leaves less food for other marine species.

Seagrass mostly grows on sandy seafloors and sometimes around mangroves in shallow waters. It is not found in the deep, because it needs sunlight to grow. Seagrass can reach up to 2 or 3 feet high if it is not harvested by marine species. It is dark- to light-green in color, depending on how much sunlight it receives.

How to protect seagrass

As a fisherman, I saw that during low tide we often damage seagrass either by stepping on it or by dragging fishing nets. Community rules or laws must be put in place in all coastal communities, including the following:

- Do not drag nets or canoes over seagrass.
- Wait for high tides before paddling over an area of seagrass.
- Educate young children on the importance of a clean environment and the sea.
- Do not trespass in other people's areas, in order to reduce conflicts.
- Chiefs and leaders must give awareness talks on how to respect other tribal properties.
- Communities must work closely with Ministry of Fisheries and Marines.

When an area is clean and healthy it will attract many marine species to graze on or live in. We should encourage individuals and families along the coast to clean the sea. This would attract not only marine species, but tourists who would come sightseeing in their areas. We should also respect the local rules put in place by chiefs and ancestors to achieve a sustainable environment.

What measures to take

In 2015, the tourists visiting my home indicated that their leisure activities would include sightseeing for dugongs and swimming with dancing dolphins. One of them explained that if a dolphin can be tamed, it is possible to tame a dugong as well. Her interest in marine animals led to an urge to protect them. Here are some suggestions to help us protect our marine species:

- Do not hunt marine species, especially dugongs and dolphins for food.
- Do not disturb a marine habitat by cutting down mangroves or polluting the area.
- People who do not abide by the marine laws must be punished severely.
- Chiefs in each coastal communities have their own set of marine rules to follow.
- Responsible authorities, such as marine biologists and fishery officers, should give awareness talks.
- Train local divers on how to treat marine species such as dugongs, dolphins and turtles.

Monitoring and management

Coastal communities should be passionate about monitoring and management, and they should be responsible for their marine resources and species. By protecting marine species at the local level, youths can engage and connect with marine species.

When communities have enough experience in their marine protected areas (MPAs), they can form partnerships and collaborate with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or even overseas donors so that they can receive tools and technology to help enhance their conservation area. External partners, such as donors and NGOs, can then create capacity building training for youths who are interested in becoming rangers. This will ensure that the skills and knowledge needed to look after conservation areas are shared and passed on to the next generation. Traditional ecological knowledge and customary rules and rights should also be put in place to ensure that resources found in the sea are monitored and managed sustainably.

To achieve conservation and resource management in our country, we should create more partnerships and networks, and more communities should be encouraged to practice conservation and form MPAs.

The Nature Conservancy states that mining or logging in restricted areas will also disrupt ecosystems and marine biodiversity. All individuals are responsible for protecting conservation areas. Not only will we protect our resources, but we will benefit from tourists who are interested in sightseeing.

Be mindful of intruders

In recent years, Solomon Islands has learned a lot from the incursion of foreign intruders, like the Vietnamese blue boats that were found illegally fishing in our reefs. Foreign intruders include not only fishing vessels but also sailing yachts, which sometimes anchor in our bays, reefs and sandy banks. It is necessary for the responsible authorities to investigate any foreign vessel sighted.

Solomon Islands is well protected by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This law has remained the backbone for the governance of fisheries resources and ocean boundaries of the coastal states. Whether a law, regulation, policy, strategy or a formal legally enforced agreement, these are all management tools for ocean use and marine resource management.

UNCLOS is the overall law that guides fisheries management in UN member countries. This law is the same for all marine creatures, including sea mammals, tuna and turtles. It gives member countries the right to enjoy ownership of the waters and at the same time apply the law's guiding principles. It is necessary that member countries like Solomon Islands fully use the privileges. Smaller Pacific island countries like Solomon Islands have priority areas that require enforcement of UNCLOS. In addition, the National Fisheries Act of the Pacific Island needs to be strengthened out. The act states, "The size of the ocean accounts for than 90 percent of the areas bounded within the sovereignty of the Pacific island states, which includes Solomon Islands."

Therefore, we must practice sustainable use of our marine resources for future generations. It is the only way we can maximize the benefits from fisheries.

Weather and climate change

It does not matter how fast we develop or how well we manage our natural sea resources. All developments and resources depend on two things: weather patterns and climate. Weather patterns and climate are constantly changing and have now become unpredictable. Aside from the occasional bout of bad weather, such as rough seas and heavy rain, cyclones occasionally visit during the summer months. They are unavoidable and often devastating, though precautions can be taken to reduce their impact.

Rising temperatures are also another effect of climate change. All animals are sensitive to temperature. Human beings can survive in -15°C to 45°C temperatures but prefer a constant temperature of between 20°C and 25°C . As for plants, they grow rapidly in warm weather, while fish, being cold-blooded, become more active in warm water and need more oxygen.

Temperature can also affect the amount of oxygen in the water—the higher the temperature, the less dissolved oxygen. Fish have a low tolerance for variations in water temperature, so any change will impact their reproduction. If temperatures reach 40°C, they could even die.

To address climate change, neighboring countries Australia and New Zealand have supported Solomon Islanders with funds, promoting adaptation and disaster risk reduction, particularly through climate-proofing its infrastructure investments. However, it would be advantageous to have donor support that builds on traditional and local ecological knowledge at the community level, which would help protect livelihoods while building resilience to hazards.

Apart from climate change and weather patterns, other issues that threaten the region's food, water and livelihoods include rapid population growth, overharvesting and coastal developments that result in loss of marine resources, such as mangroves and corals. These issues have devastated some of our Pacific neighbors, such as Vanuatu, Fiji and Samoa, and have demonstrated that they can overturn development plans.

The Solomon Islands Government, with its funding agencies and organizations, must find innovative ways to help boost capacity in our islands to manage the public and also to build resilience to climate change. More generally, the donor community needs to be upright and have long-term commitments to our country. It is not just a matter of quickly rehabilitating infrastructure after a storm or any other natural crisis. Only consistent long-term support is viable.

If our partners, organizations and government overlook all these proposed developments, then we will surely lose all our sea mammals, tuna and turtles, because they can leave their habitats and find comfort zones in other continents.

I hope I got you thinking, but we must be serious. Our fish, our turtles and our sea mammals in the ocean do not have a voice to represent themselves. But we can contribute by writing this type of essay. The more we talk about these creatures, the more aware our people will be and perhaps assist in strengthening our ocean conservation. With a strong voice, our government will listen sincerely with a good heart and an open mind. If this is not done or put in action by those in places of authority, our country stands to lose enormous amounts of money through the potential loss of revenue. At the moment, most of our national revenue comes from logging, tourism and fishing, but most of our marine resources, such as beche-de-mer, black lips and green snails, can only be harvested in certain months. This harvest is fully controlled by the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, but the revenue is quite small compared to logging and tourism. Nevertheless, climate change can affect these resources, so we need to take care of them.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to say that what is documented here includes careful research, local ideas and my own experiences that date back to my childhood in 1969. I may be too optimistic in saying this, but it will be best if you and your screening committee will finally gather all the data and information from various writers and generate constructive suggestions, opinions and ideas. Names of contributors should also be included.

In my humble view, as a fisherman and a rural Solomon Islander, I fully support what I have written and I am satisfied with providing safety for our ocean mammals and their feeding grounds. I consider them of paramount importance because they are also creatures of God and all human beings are obligated to treat them with respect.

In summary, the fisheries department must support four main areas:

- visiting marginalized rural areas to give awareness and ocean talks
- providing transfer technology
- providing a sea mammals manual
- Including information on tuna, turtles and other marine species in the *Solomon Star* newspaper.

Seagrass and dugongs need each other, plus you and me

By Michael Samani (Open Category)

Betikama School

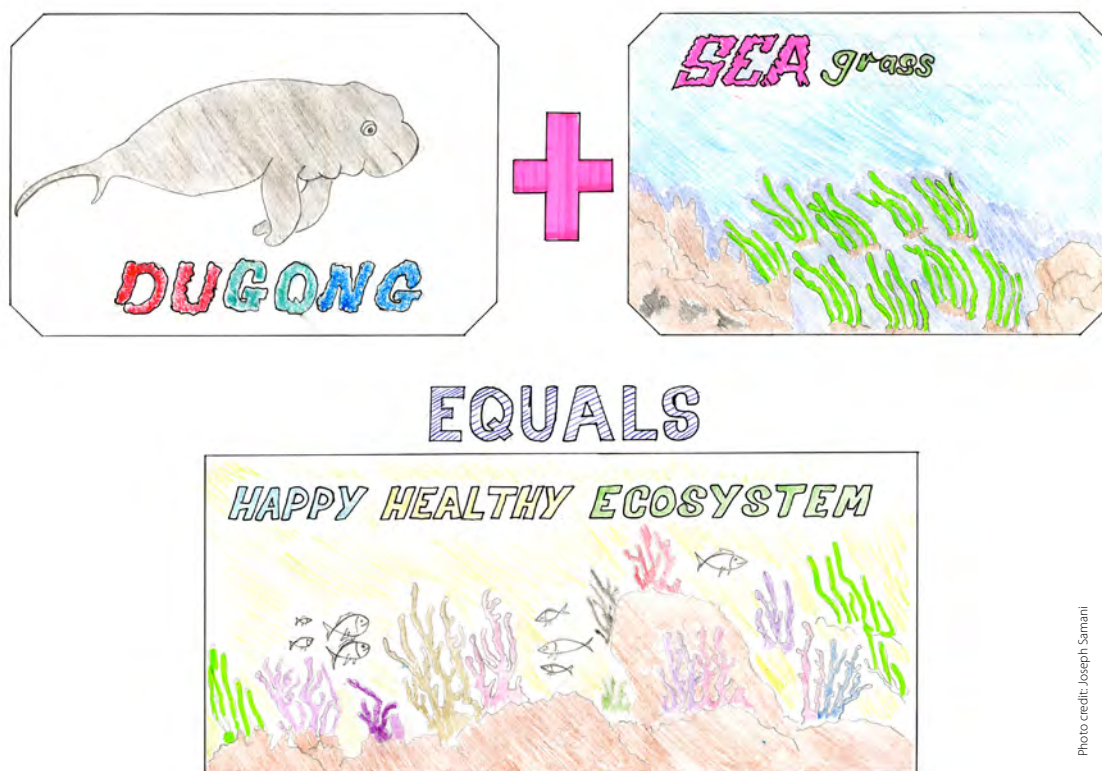


Photo credit: Joseph Samani

In a peaceful undersea garden, a gentle dugong carefully munching on dancing seagrass is the portrayal of a healthy happy ecosystem.

Dugongs are often called sea cows, but their closest relatives are elephants. Dugongs are fair and meek mammals. These special creatures are vegetarian marine mammals. Although their lifespan can reach up to 70 years, their production rate is quite low, but between their big body and their strength, dugongs are able to avoid predators and live long lives.

A dugong's life rests mainly on seagrass. Wherever there is patch of seagrass, you will likely find a dugong.

As vegetarian marine mammals, dugongs rely heavily on seagrass for survival. Without it they would die. Seagrass, which is found under the sea, is classified as a grass—a group of flowering plants that has adapted to grow in shallow marine waters. Tropical and temperate coastlines are home for seagrass, where it thrives alongside mangroves and reefs that sit along the same line, giving homes to a number of marine species.

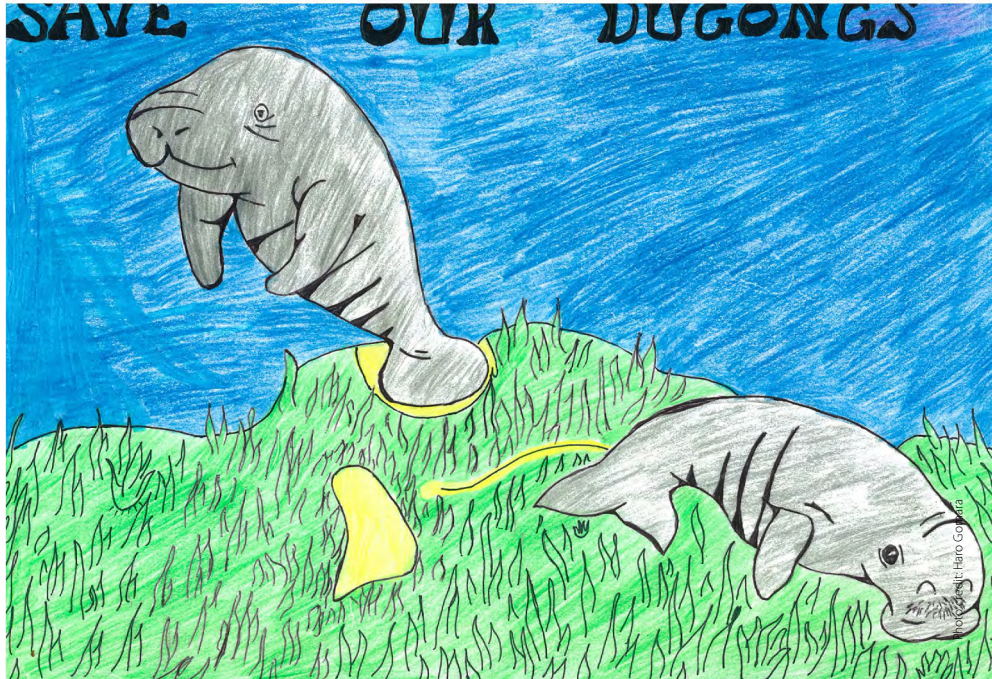
Seagrass and dugongs add spice to the mix of a marine ecosystem, but the two are under threat. They are both regarded as threatened species on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List that face extinction. Human beings are the biggest threat to their survival, especially because of their use of explosives and chemicals for fishing.

It is possible that future generations of humans will never see a dugong wandering in the sea. Every time a patch of seagrass is polluted and destroyed, a dugong slowly dies as well. Just as dugongs need seagrass, they also need you and me. If irresponsible human activities continue, they will lead to the extinction of this species. But there is always a solution to a problem. Humans must stop dynamite fishing. Instead, they must increase the amount of seagrass to keep dugongs alive and allow them to enjoy life in a healthy happy marine ecosystem.

No human is an island. We all depend on each other. As such, dugongs and seagrass need both you and me.

Dugongs

By Charlotte Preece (School Category)



Dugongs have been hunted for thousands of years. These feeble animals make an easy target for coastal hunters who are after their meat, oily skin, bones and teeth. Traditional hunting still has great cultural significance in several countries in its modern range, particularly northern Australia and the Pacific Islands. Nowadays, dugongs are legally protected throughout their range, but their populations are still declining. The dugong's current distribution is fragmented, and many populations are believed to be close to extinction.

These enormous sea mammals can be found in warm coastal waters from East Africa to Australia, including the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Australia is home to the largest population of dugongs, stretching from Shark Bay in Western Australia to Moreton Bay in Queensland. The Great Barrier Reef provides important feeding areas for the species and houses a large population of around 10,000. However, the population has shifted over time.

Dugongs feed on seagrass day and night, rooting for them with their bristled, sensitive snouts and chomping them with their rough lips. These large vegetarians have huge appetites and spend seven or eight days just eating. Also, they can stay underwater for six minutes before surfacing and sometimes breathe by standing on their tail with their heads above water. Dugongs spend most of their time alone or in pairs but sometimes they are seen in herds of a hundred animals.

Dugongs are related to manatees and are similar in appearance and behavior, though their tail is fluked like that of a whale's. Both dugongs and manatees are related to the elephant, even though they are not similar in appearance or behavior to that of the giant land mammal. Dugongs, though they are related to elephants, are called sea cows because they spend their day contentedly grazing on grass—they need to eat more than 100 lbs. (45 kg) of seagrass every day—but they are not related to cows. Also, dugongs are not fish; they are mammals. And as the largest vegetarian in the sea, they are the only marine herbivore in the world. Dugongs can weigh as much as 2000 lbs. (907 kg). Although they look clumsy, water supports the dugong's body, so the animal can do somersaults, headstands, etc. Besides that, a rounded tail makes dugongs good swimmers.

There is no such thing as a full-grown dugong. They continue to grow as long as they live. In terms of reproduction, female dugongs have one calf after a yearlong pregnancy and the mother helps her young reach the surface to take its first breath. A young dugong remains close to its mother for about 18 months, sometimes catching a ride on her broad back. Some people believe dugongs were the inspiration for ancient seafaring tales of mermaids and sirens.

Now that you know a little bit more about dugongs, please learn to preserve their lives.

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